

# 1

## Love Too Good To Be True?

### 1 John 1:1–10

On a trip to Haiti I made a special friend, a young man named Daniel. He served as a translator for those who served in the clinic we hosted. By the time he was eight years old, every member of his family was dead. He was an orphan in a very depressed culture. I was fascinated by the maturity and tenderness in this Christian man who had suffered so much. He was singular in his ambition to get the appropriate training to help his people. Today he is well on his way toward starting an orphanage and finishing his college degree here in the States, majoring in third world economics and microenterprise.

In my American naïveté, I wondered how he could have possibly turned out so psychologically healthy without proper professional Christian counseling. Why was he not embittered? Why was he not irresponsible, angry, or afflicted by poor self-esteem, considering his horrific past? So I asked him how the death of his last family member affected him. “I cried,” he replied, “I cried a lot. I was very sad.” “So how did you move forward? How did you find comfort?” I asked. He said, “I started reading my Bible and realized how much God loved me.” For a moment I looked at him in disbelief and thought to myself, “How could he have come so far with just his Bible?” And then I was embarrassed. What had occurred in my thinking such that I would believe that therapy is more powerful than God’s love revealed through Jesus Christ in the Word of God?

My purpose here is not to discourage counseling, of course. That, too, is a means of grace. My purpose is to awaken us afresh to the transforming power of the love of God the Father revealed in Jesus Christ and sealed to our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Do you know that love? Have you forgotten that love? Are you living as a spiritual orphan? The realization of this love only comes by means of a constant and daily rehearsal of the good news of the gospel, that Jesus Christ through his death paid the price to reconcile us with the Father if we will confess our sins and receive his gift of righteousness.

In the opening verses of the first chapter, the apostle John lays the foundation not only for the rest of the book of 1 John but also for the whole of the Christian life. But before we look at those verses, how do we know that John is the author of this epistle?

Most of what we know about John’s epistles comes from the testimony of Church history. As we read these books, we are not able to draw on additional historical background as we can from the book of Acts or 1 and 2 Corinthians. Rather, it is from early Church fathers like Irenaeus, Eusebius, and Polycarp that we have concluded issues of authorship, origin, and purpose.<sup>1</sup> For example, we conclude from these early testimonies that the author was the apostle John who also wrote the Gospel of John and Revelation. Some think that John wrote these epistles from Ephesus after his exile on Patmos.<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus reports an encounter between John and the heretic Cerinthus who taught that the divine Christ descended on Jesus at the time of his baptism and left him shortly before his death on the cross.

As a result, some infer that John is a corrective to that heretical view of Christ's divinity. However, a number of John's themes have nothing to do with Cerinthian Gnosticism. It is more likely that John is addressing heretics who have arisen within the Ephesian congregations. It is probable that John is confronting those who think they can adopt Christianity into their paganism and Christ as just another god in their pantheon.<sup>3</sup>

What is abundantly clear is that John is laying out the tests for true faith. He presents the clearest explanation in the New Testament of what biblical knowing involves. The Bible has no concept of true knowledge consisting only of facts. True knowledge in the Bible changes who you are and how you behave. Therefore John says, "Your claim to know that Christ is righteous will be verified by your righteous life and your claim to love Jesus will be proven by the way you love your brothers and sisters in the Church."

Someone once told me that it is too dangerous to preach 1 John because of its piercing applications. But in fact, it is dangerous to preach any book of the Bible because the Word of God always "finds us" as Augustine once said. No one can expect to be comfortable all the time when worshiping in a Bible-preaching church. The greatest challenge to us is that John, like the rest of the New Testament, never tells us what kind of love we are to expect or demand from other Christians. He only tells us how we must love.

While I know we will be challenged, sifted and upbraided by these epistles, I also know by definition that God's Word by the ministry of the Spirit will console, comfort, and encourage us. The secret to a free, joyful and responsible Christian life is being convinced of the Father's love. These verses unpack an overwhelming love—planned, proactive and personal—which leads to true fellowship.

## **I. OVERWHELMING, INCREDIBLE LOVE—1:1-4.**

### **A. Planned "from the beginning"—1:1.**

- 1. The post-modern quest.** The identification of "that which" is found at the end of 1:1. It is "the Word of life," which is Jesus Christ, who came to earth as a man to save his people from their sins by substituting his righteous life for their sinful ones. John tells us that this word of salvation existed from the beginning of the world. This is a fact that post-modern men and women especially need to know. Post-modern thinkers are fond of speaking of each individual's "narrative," that is, each person has a different story or experience and that experience is the source of each individual's truth. Therefore, for the post-modern thinker there is no such thing as a universal truth or "meta-narrative," just a collection of individual "truths." They say that there is no big story that ultimately gives meaning to all of the individual stories.

John tells us that Jesus Christ provides the "meta-narrative." The Bible tells us not only that Christ has always existed but that it has always been God's plan to provide salvation through him. This is not only a truth that post-modern people need to know; it is one that

believers need to be reminded of, especially as our biblical literacy diminishes with each generation.

- 2. The Bible's meta-narrative.** To get this picture of the eternity of God's plan to save through Jesus Christ, we need to survey the Bible. The earliest reference point for God's plan is actually found in the last book of the Bible. There John writes that the "Lamb was slain from the creation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). That means that when God created the world, it was his plan to redeem his elect through the substitution of Christ as a sacrificial lamb. The apostle Paul gives us further insight when he explains that God created the world in order to manifest this wise means of salvation (Ephesians 3:9-10). In other words, God created the world to be an arena for his work of salvation. The first proclamation of this good news was by God himself to Adam and Eve shortly after their sin when he declared that the Savior would be born of a woman and that he would crush the head of the devil (Genesis 3:15). To Abraham, he promised that he would bring the blessings of salvation to Jews and Gentiles through his "Seed," meaning the one man Jesus Christ (Genesis 12:7; 13:15; Galatians 3:16). Hebrews informs us that the prophet/king Melchizedek appeared as a prefigurement of Christ (Genesis 15:18-20; Hebrews 7). The sacrifices of the book of Leviticus prepared us for the one sacrifice of Jesus (Hebrews 10). In Deuteronomy 18:14-22, Moses prophesied of a perfect prophet to come, namely, Jesus. Job anticipates an intercessor who will be his friend (Job 16:20-21), and a Redeemer who will stand upon the earth (Job 19:25). David gives numerous prophecies of the coming Christ, including the record of the conversation between the Father and Son, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet" (Psalm 110:1). Solomon describes the eternity of Christ, calling him "Wisdom" in Proverbs 8. Isaiah saw him as the "Man of Sorrows," and one buried in a tomb not his own, and yet who would heal us with his stripes (Isaiah 53). Daniel described a rock hewn from the mountain without human hands which would topple all the kings of the earth who put themselves up against God (Daniel 2:44-45). Malachi comforted his people with the assurance that the sun of righteousness would rise with healing in his wings (Malachi 4:2). And the last Old Testament prophet, John the Baptist, announced what this John says was true from the creation of the world, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29).

The message of salvation in Jesus Christ is the oldest message in the world. It is the meta-narrative that makes sense of all other narratives—the only story which will make sense of your story. This message is the answer to everything for which post-modern man is searching. It is the message of a God-man who is uncorrupted by this world and comes into it to make sense of disjointed history. It is the message of a prophet who can speak a single coherent truth into confusing and competing worldviews. It is the message of a king who is sovereign over all reality and can protect one from every seen and unseen enemy. It is the message of a priest who can reconcile one with the God everyone knows is there.

## **B. Pro-active: "life appeared"—1:2.**

1. **Father's testimony.** This message is about a person, a person who gives real life. Everyone wants to live life, not just to exist. John announces that Jesus Christ who identified himself as *the* Life, the source of all real living, has come (cf. John 14:6). There is a conjunction preceding "the life" that does not appear in our translation, so that the sentence could read, "indeed the life appeared." That is to say, it has truly come; it is no illusion. The whole sentence literally reads, "indeed the life, the eternal life, that which was with the Father." The prepositional phrase, "with the Father," contains a word whose root means *near* or *facing*. This life is not simply in the presence of the Father; it is reflective of the Father's life. Paul explains in Philippians 2:6 that Christ was in "very nature God." By that he meant that Christ shared all the distinctive characteristics of divinity, like the Father. By this preposition, John clarifies that Jesus Christ is a distinct person from the Father even while he shares all the same qualities of Deity. So the life which has appeared is the life of Jesus Christ which was near to and facing the Father's. Why do you think John describes Jesus' life that way? It is because he wants us to know the love of the Father through Jesus Christ. Later he will exclaim, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God!" (1 John 3:1). Jesus said, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Paul says similarly that Christ is the "image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). Therefore, John is explaining that Christ's life, like a mirror, represents to us the Father's life.
2. **Apostles' testimony.** But John adds something else of importance. John says that he and each of the apostles has seen the life of Christ reflecting the life of the Father, testified to it with their writings, and proclaimed it even to the point of death. They testified to and proclaimed every aspect of his appearing: his birth, life, death, resurrection and visits thereafter. It was the most foundational apostolic testimony of the New Testament Church (1 Timothy 3:16).

In other words, the Lord Jesus came to demonstrate in flesh and blood the character of the heavenly Father. God the Father so much desired that we would know his love for us, his compassion for us, his desire to reconcile with us, and his faithfulness in preserving and keeping us that he sent his Son into a cursed world to represent perfectly all of his qualities. Furthermore, he surrounded his Son with twelve men (thirteen, counting Paul), who would personally witness that life and relay what they saw to us. These men would be tortured, imprisoned, sewn up in animal skins, boiled in oil, exiled, crucified and beheaded for that very testimony. Think of it. It was so important to God that you and I should not only be saved but know the Father's love that he willingly gave his Son's life and the lives of these heroic apostles to confirm it to us. The life which has truly appeared and has been confirmed by the blood of the apostles is the life that is found in the love of the heavenly Father.

- C. **Personal—1:3-4.** "To have fellowship . . ." Now notice that John does not allow us to view this revelation as some abstract bit of Bible trivia. He makes clear that God revealed himself in Christ so that we could have life by means of an intimate relationship with him.
  1. **God's fellowship.** Christ came to earth to reconcile us with the Father from whom we had become estranged as well as to provide relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul

explains elsewhere that at one time we were alienated from God our Father and hated him in our minds because we loved our sinful behaviors more. However, it was God the Father who sought us and provided reconciliation through the physical body of the Lord Jesus (Colossians 1:22-23). As a result we no longer live as orphans in the world, cowering in fear, hoarding selfishly, afraid to be joyful, and dreading the challenges of life. We have the spirit of Sonship and cry out loudly and triumphantly, “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:16; Galatians 4:7). That is living! Living with your chin up and your shoulders squared and with a smile on your face because you know this is your Father’s world. Living as a child of God means you no longer have to nurse every little wound and harbor every little disappointment, because you know your Father has accepted you. Living no longer includes worrying if God is going to do something bad to you because you now know the Father can only act lovingly toward you.

- 2. Christian fellowship.** But notice also that John explains these truths so that we might have fellowship with one another. We prove the reality of the Father’s love in us by the way we love each other. There could hardly be a more appropriate emphasis in our culture. We are a disjointed society which no longer knows how to create and maintain relationships. On the whole the evangelical church is only slightly better at building relationships than the rest of the world. Besides the activity of the Holy Spirit, the only reason we are better is that we are still gathering corporately to worship. The average unbeliever never meets with as many people in one place as a churchgoer does every week, so that he never has opportunity for meaningful conversation.

We lead more active lives than ever, but we are active by ourselves or within our own families. As Robert Putnam says, we are “bowling alone.” We are working longer hours and our kids are scheduled from early morning to late at night. We are living like robots, moving along through life through stimuli produced by someone else. That is, we can hardly do anything as adults or children unless it is planned by someone else. So we have begun to look to the Church for the same: we expect the Church to create relationships for us, to build programs that provide “community” which none of us knows how to build. Further, evangelicals in particular want churches that have such programs even though they have no desire to attend them, because somehow it makes us feel better to be in a place where there is “community” even though we don’t have time to be a part of it.

The great challenge John will provide for us is that he will never tell *the other person* how he or she is supposed to love us. He, like the rest of the New Testament, will only tell *us* how we are supposed to love. The Bible commands individuals to prove the reality of their own faith by demonstrating love in real relationships. That means that each person must ask, “What do I need to rearrange in my schedule to make more room for fellowship?” “How can I greet people in a more welcoming way?” “When am I going to have others into my home for a meal?” If you want people to be more vulnerable around you with their lives, how are you going to lead the way? If you have taken vows and made a covenant commitment to your church, then this is your mission field in which to create relationships. The Bible never

gives you permission to go to a different church simply because you think the one you are in is not friendly.

In other words, if you are a Christian, this is your mission. God was estranged from you, because you hated him. He did not leave you and go get another people or create another society. He went after you. At infinite personal cost, he created a relationship with you by removing every obstacle—your sin, his wrath, and your straying heart. Through the blood of his apostles he brought this message of reconciliation to you. Every day he pursues you in his Word and in answer to your prayers. He invites you into his house for meals. And he asks you to do one thing in response: to pursue the same reconciliation with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

You may be discouraged by what you just read, because you feel like a weight has been put on your already overburdened shoulders. Perhaps you have become accustomed to closing your ears to any of God's promises and opening them only to duties. For most of this lesson we have reveled in God's amazing love for us, planned from before the foundation of the world, pro-active in seeking our reconciliation, and personal in its expressed desire for fellowship. But do not hear only the last part—that our response must be to love others the same way. I know that is the way many people hear because it is the way I used to hear. We cannot believe God's love could be that great. It is too good to be true. And it *is* too good to be true, in the human realm. That is why it can only be explained by a God who brought it to us by becoming a man. Maybe a parent has discouraged you all of your life. Maybe your spouse has rejected you. Perhaps your children have rebelled against you. Perhaps a minister has disappointed you. And that experience has made you believe that God cannot be what the Bible says he is. My friend, nobody can undo what another person has done to you. I am not asking you to believe me. I am showing you that God can be believed and his word trusted. With Christ as your Savior, God the Father loves you today as much as he has ever loved you from eternity past. Knowledge of that love will set you free to live and love for him with joy.

## **II. THE SECRET TO TRUE FELLOWSHIP—1:5-10.**

Having laid the foundation of the trustworthiness of the Father's love, John now proceeds to make specific application of how the Father's character must determine how we live. At one and the same time he unnerves and comforts us with the fact that God is light.

We once knew a little boy who was attacked by a German Shepherd dog that left a large gash in the little boy's leg. It was the kind of wound that had to be left open to light and air so that it could heal from the inside out. It was painful and uncomfortable but it was the only avenue to healing. God's light exposes our sinfulness and that can be painful, but it is the only hope of our redemption and the only avenue to true fellowship with God, with other people, and with ourselves. The only way to spiritual healing is to live in the exposing light of God's Word.

**A. Fellowship with God—1:5, 6, 10.** In verse 5, John declares that God is light. It is the first of three strong declarations of who God is in his essence. Elsewhere John will identify God as spirit (4:24) and love (4:16), but here he is light.

**1. Consistency—1:5.** John stresses “this is the message.” That is to say, “this message exists and has so for all eternity.” It did not originate with John, and is not subject to alteration. It is God’s eternal message. John and the apostles heard and experienced this message from Jesus Christ, the revelation of God the Father. To what is John referring when he calls God “light”? Some have understood that God is the literal source of luminescence. Of course God did create the sun and the phenomenon of light, but that is not John’s concern here. He is referring to the truthfulness of God. That is clear by his references to truth in verses 6 and 8 and his negative reference in verse 10. However, John is using “truth” in a Hebraic way, not a Greek way or even an American way. Truth is not simply true facts. Truth is complete faithfulness, covenant faithfulness (cf. Psalm 143:1). It is the opposite of the dichotomy we often experience in our culture. For instance, in the public debates over President Clinton’s immorality, Newt Gingrich’s unfaithfulness, and Bill Bennett’s gambling, people have said things like, “It does not matter what he does in his private life; it is his job performance that matters.” There is no such dichotomy in God. What God says, he does, because he is truth. Truthfulness is not only saying and doing the same thing; it is saying true things, doing true things, and being truthful through and through.

**2. Confession—1:6, 10.** Now John insists that if one claims to be a Christian he must be moving toward the same through-and-through truthfulness or faithfulness. Because the Spirit of Christ lives inside them, Christians must imitate God’s character. In order to move us toward this consistency, John challenges the gap between our claims and practices. If we really have fellowship with God then we will begin to live like we have been in his presence. The person who continues to live in the darkness of a sour attitude, cutting tongue, material greed, sexual immorality, substance abuse, or self-destructive pathologies does not reflect that he lives in fellowship with the God of light.

The secret to living in true fellowship with God is not to change your behavior but rather to allow him to expose the inconsistency of your claims and practices by his light in order that he might begin to cure them. Let me give you an example of how I discovered this phenomenon some years ago. I was too high strung about spills by our children in our home which was owned by the church. I had a great zeal to preserve that home that was so graciously provided for us. I had known for a while that I was too uptight about it and hurt the children’s feelings by the way I sometimes reacted. I prayed about it. And I really worked on making myself better. But once while serving the children lunch, I made a spill in the kitchen and I laughed about it. “Daaad,” I heard in a soft reluctant voice. It was Taylor, my son. He asked, “Why do you get mad when we spill, but laugh when you spill?” I thought of a range of responses like, “Because I rarely spill,” or “because I clean up my own spills,” etc. But I knew the only proper answer, so I gave it with great chagrin: “Well, Taylor, it is because I am a hypocrite and I need God to cure me of it not only in this area, but lots of areas.” It was the beginning of getting better. Likewise, you will not begin to experience God’s closing the

gaps between your claims and your actions until you open yourself to his light's exposure of your hypocrisies. And just like my fellowship with my kids was strengthened as a result of honesty, so you will experience more intimate fellowship with the Father when you confess what he already knows: you still have many pockets of darkness that need to be cleaned out by his light.

In verse 10, John says to refuse to confess what the Bible says about our being sinners is to call God a liar. God confirms from one end of the Bible to the other that we are sinners. If we refuse to affirm that message, then we are claiming to be sinless, we call him a liar, and we reject the gospel (Hebrews 4:2). We can never experience the good news and be reconciled with God until we confess the bad news.

Why do you suppose our culture says the church is full of hypocrites? I think it is because they have primarily heard us emphasize law more than grace, that the way to have fellowship with God is by doing rather than receiving. And by focusing on law we become poorer doers. As Paul says in Romans 7, living by law only exacerbates rebellion. Living by God's gracious exposure of our hypocrisy fosters loving consistency.

**B. With other people—1:7-9.** Not only is confession of sin the secret to living in fellowship with God, it is also the secret to living in true fellowship with other people.

**1. Confession—1:8-9.** What then does living in the light involve? First, it involves being honest about who we are. We must confess who we know ourselves to be by definition. Being truthful in the biblical sense means admitting we are liars. It means confessing that there is a serious disconnect between the faith we profess and the faith we practice. And the dysfunction is not found in the faith but in ourselves. So what must we do? We must confess our sins. To whom? To God of course, but the context of this passage together with that in James 5 indicates that such confession must also be made to others. We have over-privatized this verse. While it is God alone who forgives and purifies, the realization of forgiveness and the benefits of his righteousness are most thoroughly experienced by means of confession to one another. I am convinced that the back of besetting sins is never broken unless it is confessed to someone significant in your life. Likewise, the realization of forgiveness is most powerful when love and favor are extended by the Christian community after the confession of sin.

At this point John is not talking about the act of sin, but the fact that we are sinful. There came a point in our history as a nation when the doctrine of original sin became unpopular. Original sin means we have inherited a predisposition to sinful thoughts, words and deeds from our earthly father, Adam. That means we have a fundamentally broken nature such that we naturally always choose sin, never righteousness. Eighteenth-century American theologians began to assert that one only became a sinner upon committing sin and that he was as capable of choosing to act righteously as he was of choosing unrighteousness.<sup>4</sup> Somehow it seemed to go down better that we “occasionally make bad choices” rather than the idea that we are fundamentally defective. John makes it clear that the reason we act

sinfully is that we are sinful. And we will never live truthfully until we admit that there is something flawed in our basic constitution.

2. **Community—1:7.** The result of such confession will not drive away true friends but rather create genuine fellowship. Not only will lying about our condition hinder our fellowship with God; it will hinder our true fellowship with others. We will forever be pushing people away or keeping them at bay. We will never truly connect with each other unless we are honest about how sinful we are. We will forever remain unreal toward each other. However, it is not necessary to confess every single sin to every single person. The main point John is pushing is to admit to yourself that you are a sinner so that you will humbly draw near to other people rather than judging them as beneath you.

The promise that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin is one of the most comforting in all of Scripture. No conditions are placed on it. Jesus purifies us from *all* sin when it is entrusted to the work of his blood. But why do you suppose John attaches it to fellowship with other believers, which flows from walking in the light? I think it is because John is writing to assure believers of the trustworthiness of the gospel (1 John 5:13), and one of the primary means through which Christ ministers that assurance is Christian fellowship. Assurance is gained through Christian friends as we confess our sins to one another and learn that Christ is purifying all of us from all manner of sins. If you are refusing to confess your sins to one another because you are afraid of how it will sound to another Christian, you are sinning against the body of Christ by leading someone to believe that you struggle less than they do.

- C. **With ourselves—1:8.** John also warns that denying sin is to live in self-deceit and ultimately self-destruction. The concealing of sin can lead to physical illness (Psalm 37; James 5) and lack of success in numerous areas of one's life (Proverbs 28:13).

Venture to come into God's light. It will not always be pleasant. It will expose your motives, the ugliness of your sin, and the disappointing facts about your character. But it is the only way to know the grace of God in its fullness, the only means to real fellowship, and the only avenue to true self-knowledge.

## **Dearly Beloved—Lesson 1**

***Read the lesson notes and 1 John 1:1-10.***

1. What is it about God’s love as described in these notes that seems “too good to be true”? What most impressed and/or encouraged you about it?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What in this lesson challenges you to lead not a superficial but an authentic life before God and others? What will you ask God to apply to your life for that to occur?

**Read 1 John 2:1-14.**

3. **1John 2:1-6.** If you are a Christian, what role does Jesus Christ take before the Father for you when you sin?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Depending upon your translation, **1 John 2:2** includes the term “atoning sacrifice,” “propitiation,” or “expiation.” Using a theological or regular dictionary, what do these terms mean, and how is Jesus Christ “the propitiation for our sins”?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. How can **1 John 2:3-6** be explained in light of **1 John 2:1-2**? Is John contradicting himself here? Why or why not?

6. **1 John 2:7-8.** What is this “new command” that is also an “old” one? See **Genesis 3:13, 4:8-11; Leviticus 19:18, 34; Deuteronomy 6:5;** MATTHEW 22:34-40; and **2 John 5-6.**
  
7. In **1 John 2:9-11,** what is true of the one who “hates his brother”? What is true of the one who “loves his brother”?
  
8. **1 John 2:12-14.** How is **1 John 2:12** the foundation statement for **1 John 2:13-14**?
  
9. Why does John write to the fathers of the church (**1 John 2:13a** and **1 John 2:14a**)? How does this relate to **1 John 2:12** and their leadership of the rest of the church?
  
10. What are John’s reasons for writing to the young people?
  
11. What kinds of images are evoked by his language to these young men, and why do you think John uses these word pictures? See also **Ephesians 6:10-20** and **1 Peter 5:1-11.**
  
12. As you think about God’s love for you, how does **1 John 2:1-14** challenge and encourage you to reflect that love in your daily life?