

# Life in the Fading Darkness

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we're going to turn to the Bible now, and I'd like you to turn to John's first letter. And to chapter 1.

1 John, chapter 1. I believe in the church Bibles, that's on page 1021. 1 John, chapter 1.

I'm going to read from verse 5 through to chapter 2, verse 11.

But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous.

He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. And by this we know that we've come to know him, if we keep his commandments.

[ 2 : 04 ] Whoever says, I know him, but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.

By this we may be sure that we are in him. Whoever says he abides in him, ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. Beloved, I'm writing to you no new commandments, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning.

The old commandment is the word that you've heard. At the same time, it's a new commandment that I'm writing to you, which is true in him and in you. Because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.

Whoever says he's in the light and hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness and does not know where he is going.

Because the darkness has blinded his eyes. This is the word of the Lord, and we thank him for it. Let's pray together as we come to God's words.

[ 3 : 27 ] Let's pray. Father, we thank you once again, as we so often do, for the privilege of having your words in our own language. And the freedom to gather around together and to learn from you.

And we pray for the work of your spirit among us. We pray that you would bring your truth to bear in our lives in powerful ways that will change the way we think and the way we behave.

And we ask this in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen. Please turn to 1 John chapter 1. And as you're doing so, let me ask you the question.

Have you ever felt inferior as a Christian? Well, I guess the answer is, well, of course you have. You will have had people look down on you for being a Christian. Thought you were slightly stupid or foolish for believing in something so crazy as that.

But let me ask you again, have you been made to feel inferior by others who call themselves Christian? That's a more difficult thing to bear.

[ 4 : 30 ] You expect a bit of difficulty from the world out there. But I wonder if you've been made to feel inferior by those who call themselves Christian. They seem more spiritual than you.

They look down on you as unspiritual. They offer you some sort of better Christian life than you seem to have the ordinary, everyday, kind of straggly sort of Christian life that you experience.

I wonder if you've been made to feel inferior in that kind of way. By somebody who looks and talks and acts just a bit more spiritual than you do.

Well, if so, welcome to 1 John, because that's the territory we're in in this letter. I wonder if you remember the situation. We have a group of Christians, very unsettled indeed, about the departure of some who until recently have belonged to their number.

We don't meet these departed people head on until chapter 2. Look over to 2.18. 2.18 is the point where John begins to point directly at these people who've left the congregation.

[ 5 : 42 ] But all the way through this letter, their presence is felt. And they have been the cause of massive uncertainty.

Why have they been the cause of such uncertainty? Well, I think there are three reasons in this letter. First, they look impressive. They claim to be specially in the know about God.

They claim greater power over sin. They claim greater victory over evil. They look spiritually impressive. Two, they look down on the regular Christians.

All the way through the letter, it seems clear that the normal believer, the one who's put their trust in Jesus, is being made to feel inferior, deficient, substandard, as though they're missing out on something.

And the third cause of uncertainty, I think, and this is very important, is that these people are not newcomers to the congregation. Often in the New Testament, troubling teaching comes to churches from the outside.

[ 6 : 54 ] Someone has recently arrived. They're teaching something unsettling. And so a letter is written to deal with that. But in this letter, there is no talk whatever about people who've arrived from elsewhere.

The problem is the departure of certain people. Now, it's absolutely impossible to say how long these people had been in the congregation.

Months, years, impossible to know. But it must have been long enough for their departure to cause distress. In order for this letter to make sense, we have to assume, I think, that these people were well enough known and well enough regarded for their different teaching and their superior attitude to have caused real uncertainty in those that remained.

If some stranger arrives one Sunday and starts acting and talking superior, no one's going to take that seriously. Now, let me illustrate with a really grotesque illustration.

Imagine that the Robury family were leaving today not because they were returning to a work that the church family was totally enthusiastic about.

[ 8 : 09 ] Imagine that they were leaving because they no longer wanted to be part of us. Grotesque thought. But stay with it for a moment.

Imagine as they left that they communicated they thought we were not up to the mark spiritually. That we weren't really living the Christian life as we ought to be.

Imagine that they said we were holding them back and they needed to go somewhere else more spiritual. And imagine that there were others going with them saying the same sorts of things.

That would unsettle you, wouldn't it? Now, that is a grotesque illustration, and I apologize to the Robury's for using you in that way. But this is precisely the sort of situation we're talking about in this letter.

There is no way that departure causes the kinds of uncertainties described here unless the departed are significantly known and significantly trusted.

[ 9 : 16 ] This is the world of one John. Nobody is sure who to listen to. How do we work out who is the spiritual person here? How do we work out who really knows God here?

How do we work out who's telling the truth? How do we know whose example to follow? Do we know if we should stay or go? How do we know? Those are the live questions all the way through this letter.

How would you deal with that situation if you were having to write a letter to it? Well, this morning we begin to get inside John's method.

How is the apostle going to approach this very difficult situation? What he does in the first part of this letter is to begin to do some groundwork.

Groundwork that will make all the difference when we finally get to chapter 2 and he starts pointing the finger directly. In chapter 1, the finger isn't pointing yet, but a number of issues are raised and seeds of doubt are planted that will grow into a full-blown attack on those who've departed and their teaching and their attitudes.

[ 10 : 26 ] Let me sketch out the lie of the land. I'm going to tell you where we're going before we go there so that when we go there, you know where we're going. We're going from chapter 1, verse 6 to chapter 2, verse 11.

It is quite a long section, but it hangs together very nicely as one and it's not complicated to understand. Let me say two introductory things about this section. First, do you notice that it starts and ends on the same note?

1, 6, it starts with images of darkness and light. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

But if we walk in the light, verse 7, and then the darkness and light images disappear for a while, but they reappear in chapter 2, verse 8 at the end of this section.

At the end of that sentence, the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining and we get the same dark and light thing going on in 2, 9 and 2, 10 and 2, 11.

[11:32] So this section is the light and darkness section of the letter. And because we're told 2, 8, that the darkness is passing away, I've called this sermon, Life in the Fading Darkness.

Second observation. Do you notice how this whole section is built around two sets of three? Two sets of three things that people might say.

The first set of three starts, if we say. Look at chapter 1, verse 6. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness.

The second one, 1, 8. If we say we have no sin. Third one, 1, 10. If we say we have not sinned. As we'll see in a moment, the first three are tied up with the subject of sin and forgiveness.

The second set of three start, whoever says, whoever says, whoever says. Chapter 2, verse 4.

Whoever says I know him, but does not keep his commandments.

[12:44] 2, 6. Whoever says he abides in him. 2, 9. Whoever says he's in the light and hates his brother. And as we'll see in a moment, this second set of three are all tied up with the subject of love and hate.

Let me summarize then. The section as a whole, life in the fading darkness. And within that, three things that people might say concerning sin and forgiveness and three things that people might say concerning love and hate.

What is this section doing here? Well, at the very beginning of the letter, John talks about the fact that God has spoken to the world through the message about Jesus.

Chapter 1, verse 2. The life was made manifest, and we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.

In verse 5, John says something more about the content of the message. God is light light, and in him is no darkness at all.

[13:59] What this section teaches us is that this message about God being light comes into a dark world.

Light and darkness do not exist together in God, verse 5, but they do exist together in God's world. And what this section teaches us is what it's like to be on the receiving end of the message of light in a world where the darkness has not yet passed away.

It's as if John is saying, look, you guys, you belong to an eternal network of light and joy through our message. Well, let me remind you what that's like in this dark world.

Now, with that in mind, let's begin to look at this section. Notice that the first of each of these sets of three claims is a false claim to know God.

Look at 1.6 again. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and don't practice the truth. And look at 2.4.

[15:20] Whoever says, I know him, but doesn't keep his commands is a liar and the truth is not in him. This dark world is a realm in which people claim to know God, but not all those claims are true claims.

And what John does through this section is twofold. He begins to unmask the false claims of those who've departed. And on the other hand, he encourages those that remain that they do indeed know God.

That lot don't, but you do. That's what's going on through this section. Let's look at the first set then. Living in the fading darkness, part one, sin and forgiveness.

Look at chapter one, verse six. Now notice the basic shape of these false claims. First, we get the false claim.

Verse six, if we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in the darkness. And then, John draws a conclusion from that false claim. we lie and do not live according to the truth.

[16:39] And then he follows it up with a corresponding true action. But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, and then he draws a conclusion from that true action.

We have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus, his son, cleanses us from all sin. So the basic pattern of the whole of this section is false claim and a conclusion drawn from it, true action and a conclusion drawn from that.

There are one or two minor variations on that, but that is the basic pattern. So with that in mind, how does this first section begin to unmask what is false?

Let's look at the three false claims. One, six. Saying we have fellowship with God while we walk in darkness. One, eight. Saying we have no sin.

One, ten. Saying we have not sinned. John often uses threes like this. And often the first one is a kind of headline idea and it's unpacked by numbers two and three.

[ 17 : 45 ] Well, that's what's going on here. If we say we have fellowship with him while walking in the darkness, John, what do you mean by walking in the darkness? Well, I mean one, eight.

Saying we have no sin. I mean one, ten. Saying we've not sinned. What I mean, says John, is denying sinfulness.

In this little triad, the issue in question is claiming to know God while in some way denying sinfulness.

That, says John, that's walking in the darkness. Now, it's all put rather hypothetically here. If we say, if we say, if we say, but I imagine that's precisely what some people were saying.

We know God, but actually, we're denying sin in some sort of way. Now, it's impossible to know in what way these people were denying sinfulness. I wonder if they were the sort of people who asserted their own spiritual superiority by saying that since they'd come into knowledge of God, they hadn't sinned or sin had some lesser power in their lives.

[ 18 : 57 ] My guess is not that they denied that it was a real thing, simply that they denied that it had a real hold on them. What does John have to say about that?

Well, he says it's dark world behavior. And in fact, he says it's a comprehensive exercise in lying. Look at 1.6 again. If we do that, we lie and do not practice the truth.

Verse 8, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Verse 10, we call God a liar and his word is not in us. Put them together, lying to other people, lying to self, and calling God a liar.

Do you see how John is clarifying the issue here? Brothers and sisters, it is always unnerving for the true believer to be faced with someone who claims unusual victory over sin.

Why? Because that is what the true believer at the depth of his or her being longs for, but doesn't yet have.

[ 20 : 11 ] The true child of God has begun to realize, at least in part, how perfect they are not. The true believer has begun to long for the day when deliverance will come and they will be free of their sinfulness forever, but it has not yet arrived.

Has it arrived for you? Of course it hasn't. But when you meet someone who claims unusual victory of sin, you inevitably find yourself thinking, well, I can't be a real Christian then because I'm not like that.

where you find yourself longing for what that other person has, says John, what they really have is a comprehensive network of lies and self-deception.

They might look spiritual, but denying that sin now has an active hold on you, that's dark world behavior. Do you see, he's exposing the darkness behind these spiritual-looking claims?

But notice, he's also encouraging what is true. If you found that encouraging, and I take it if you're a real Christian, you did, you'll find this even more encouraging. We had three false things, now we have three true things.

[ 21 : 24 ] One, seven, here's the headline true thing. If we walk in the light as he is in the light. John, what do you mean by that? Verse nine, if we confess our sins.

Two, one, I'm writing these things so you may not sin, but if anyone does sin, and again, I take it that the first idea is the headline, and numbers two and three, unpack it.

If we walk in the light as he is in the light, what is that walking in the light like? It's characterized by two things. First, confession of sin.

That's walking in the light behavior, says John. And second, and perhaps surprisingly, sinning despite knowing that it's inappropriate. The in the darkness talk was sin denying.

The in the light behavior, while not being sin promoting, I'm writing these things to you so that you may not sin, face his sin as an ongoing reality in the life of the believer.

[ 22 : 34 ] Now, you would think, wouldn't you, that walking in the light would go with absence of sin, but it doesn't. In fact, what goes with walking in the light is not absence of sin, but revelation of your sin.

Let me ask you if you've been a Christian for a little while. Did you feel you had a huge sin problem before you were converted? Well, I didn't feel I had a sin problem before I was converted.

My sinfulness had never bothered me before I was converted. I got converted and suddenly I had a sin problem. At least, that's the way it seemed to me. Let me ask you, Christian, do you think you are less sinful than you were a year ago?

You making any progress? Well, you might be making progress in one or two areas, but haven't you noticed that others are jumping up to fill the available space? Welcome to this dark world phase of the life of light and joy.

That's what it's like being in the light in this dark world. In this dark age, even though we know the darkness is passing away, a true believer is not a person in whom there is no darkness at all, but a person into whose dark life the light has begun to shine.

[ 23 : 57 ] Therefore, a true believer's life is characterized not by absence of sin, but by painful knowledge of its presence and need for confession and forgiveness of sins.

If you're a real Christian, you will find that wonderfully reassuring. Is that not your experience? Do you feel any less in need of confession of your sins than you did the first day you became a Christian?

Not if you're a real Christian, you don't. You know you're in the light when you begin to see your sin and you begin to know that it still needs confessing. What is the outcome for the person who finds themselves sinning, though they know it's inappropriate and confessing it?

Well, 1-9. Look at 1-9, please. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

2-1. If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins.

[ 25 : 07 ] That is to say, he's come into the world to turn God's anger at our sin away by his death on the cross. Now, these two statements go together. How can God be just and forgive sins?

He justly forgives sins because Jesus Christ, the righteous one, has died to turn away God's anger and sin. And in this dark world, though it is passing, the real believer continues to need and to feel the need of an advocate with the Father.

Now, is that not an extraordinary phrase? Who needs a lawyer to talk to their father? What do you need to talk to your father if your father's still alive?

Well, you pick up the phone. If he's a techno father, you send him a text. Imagine the next time you rang your father up and got the response, I'll talk to your barrister in court and a slammed down phone.

That would be weird, wouldn't it? Who needs an advocate with their father? Well, the believer does. Doesn't mean that the work of Jesus is in some sense incomplete. I think it's written this way to express the reality that in this age I am not delivered from the presence of sin in my life and I continue to know in my experience that I need a mediator between me and God.

[ 26 : 36 ] Of course, if I say that I don't have sin now as an active presence in my life, what am I saying? Well, I'm saying in some way I don't need Jesus anymore as mediator or I need him less than I once did.

The true believer starts the life of faith by pinning every hope on the work of Jesus and the true believer continues the life of faith every day by pinning all their hopes on the death of Jesus on their behalf.

you never move on from that. While this dark world remains, the sin problem remains an active force in the life of the believer.

It's a sign of being in the light that you know that to be true. While this dark world remains, real questions need to be asked of the person who claims unusual freedom from sin.

Real questions need to be asked of that. And that's precisely what John is beginning to do. Ask the questions of that kind of behavior. So, part one, life in the passing world, the dark world, from the perspective of sin and forgiveness.

[ 27 : 56 ] Now, much more quickly, part two, life in the passing world in relation to love. Love is very much the focus of chapter 2 verses 3 to 11.

All the way through this section, there's a particular commandment in view and it is the new commandment that Jesus gave to his disciples.

John chapter 13, a new commandment I give you, love one another as I have loved you, by this all men will know that you are my disciples. I think that's echoed in verse 6.

Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. Jesus loved people in that way. We ought to as well. Verse 7 to 8, here the new commandment is mentioned. Is it an old commandment or a new commandment? Let me read verse 7. Beloved, I'm writing to you no new commandment but an old commandment. You add from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you've heard.

[ 28 : 59 ] At the same time, it's a new commandment. Now, why is he saying that? Has he changed his mind between one verse and another? Is he contradicting himself? No, I think he means this. It is Jesus' new commandment to love one another as I have loved you that he's talking about.

But it is not new to these people in the sense that they've had it right from the beginning of their Christian experience. They've always known that the appropriate response to what God has done is to love their brothers as Christ has loved them.

Now, let's explore how does this section unmask what is false in those who've departed. let's look at the negative examples.

Verse 4, here's the headline idea. Whoever says I know him but doesn't keep his commandments is a liar. Verse 6, whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. Verse 9, what are you talking about exactly, John? Well, here we get clarity, I think. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still.

[ 30 : 14 ] Here, then, the person is pictured who says they know God but does not obey the gospel command to love the brothers. John's verdict, verse 4, liars.

They say they know God but they don't. Verse 6, well, they're not abiding in him, are they? If they were, they would be abiding in love for his people. Verse 9, they're in the darkness.

They haven't got a clue where they're going. I wonder if those who departed describe themselves as those who've seen the light, who walk in the light, who found greater light.

John says, nah, dark all over that behavior. What's the thing that's being unmasked here? Well, the thing that's being unmasked here is hatred.

hatred. In this letter, hatred is being exposed. We're not talking imperfect love. We're not talking failures of affection.

[ 31 : 17 ] We're talking hatred. And it's not merely that these people hate the brothers. I think that's what's being exposed here is why they've left. Look at verse 10.

There is a contrast between those who abide and verse 11, those who are in the darkness and walk in the darkness and don't know where they're going.

The impression is that there are those who stay and those who go. What's being revealed? What is being revealed is that these departed ones hate the brothers.

That's why they've gone. We'll see another example of this sort of idea in chapter 3. Just flip over to chapter 3. Look at 3.

11. This is the message that you've heard from the beginning that we should love one another. We're on the love theme again. We should not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother.

[ 32 : 19 ] And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brothers righteous. Cain hated his brother. That's why he murdered him. These guys, well they haven't murdered you, but all the way through this letter.

John is saying the departed ones, they've left because they hate you. I imagine that their departure was dressed up in very different language from that.

The language of spiritual superiority. We know things. We want to be free to pursue them. You're holding us back. We want to be free to pursue the light, to live in the light, to follow the truth.

John says actually the reason they aren't staying is that they don't want to stay with you. They despise you. They can't bear to be with you anymore. He's unmasking the hatred of those who've departed.

Here at the beginning it's gentle and cautious, but he gets more full on as the letter develops. And says John, that hatred of brothers says something about knowledge of God.

[ 33 : 23 ] You can't claim to know God and at the same time hate your brothers. There's no knowing God where hatred of brothers is in view.

If you hate them, you don't know God no matter what you say. Here we have revealed the heart of the departed. Guys, they left because they hate you.

And that shows they don't love God. Now such things are often not all that clear. Sometimes they are. You may have been in situations where you've seen hatred from those who called themselves Christians.

I'm sure many of us will have witnessed someone who calls themselves a Christian being quick to say how much they like you, how much they love the same things that you do and the same Lord you do, only to demonstrate by words, attitude, behavior, that actually they think you're stupid, ignorant, inferior, and not worth bothering about.

It is in my limited experience a little unusual to get that sort of thing in public so that everyone sees it, though when you do see it, it's very helpful indeed because it really clarifies things.

[ 34 : 47 ] But it isn't always clear. And what John is doing here is saying, no, these guys didn't leave you because they had more light than you.

They didn't leave you because they knew you didn't know the truth. They didn't leave you because they were more spiritual than you. They didn't leave you because you were being badly behaved.

They had all sorts of superior sounding reasons for leaving, but actually they left because they couldn't bear to be with you anymore. And that says something about their knowledge of God.

John is exposing what is false. But second, he is encouraging what is true. Look at 2.5. But, whoever keeps God's word, in him truly love of God is perfected.

And I think what John means here is that when believers love their brothers, love for God is properly developed in them.

[ 35 : 54 ] Or to put it another way, you know love for God isn't the full thing until it's reaching love for brothers. Now, John is not saying that these believers are practically perfect in every way, like Mary Poppins sort of believers.

What he's saying is those spiritual people, looking people who've left, they hate the brothers and it shows they don't know God.

But you guys who remain, you love the brothers, don't you? And it shows your love for God is genuine. That's what's happening all the way through this passage. Let me ask you an illustrative question.

How do you know that I'm Scottish? I am Scottish. You can't tell by the voice, can you? You can't. I say I'm Scottish, but who wouldn't want to claim to be Scottish?

I go pink in the sun. That's pretty good actually, but not conclusive. No, you can tell that I'm Scottish when you witness me watching sport.

[ 37 : 03 ] For when Scotland lose, as we often do, I am proud to lose with them. There's nothing I can do about it. They're my guys. If they lose, I lose.

If they don't win, I don't win. I've always been like that. It's in the genes. I can't avoid it. Do I look Scottish in absolutely every way possible? Well, certainly not. Am I Scottish?

Too right, I am. And that's what John is saying here about the real believers. You love your brothers. You're not like those guys who've departed.

These are the guys you want to be with, aren't they? Of course they are. that shows that you're the real thing. That shows that love for God is really in you. Even though those departed guys say it's not.

You are the genuine article and they aren't the genuine article. people. Now let me sum up and then we'll think of one or two implications. We need to know what life is like in this passing darkness.

[ 38 : 06 ] There are lots of false claims to know God in this dark world. How do you spot the false? Well, it denies sin's ongoing power and minimizes the significance of the death of Jesus for sin.

and it hates the brothers. And alarm bells ought to be going off in your head when you hear people talk like that.

It expresses itself in superiority towards ordinary believers, looking down on them, those ones who still struggle with their sins and still have to confess their sins and still trust in the death of Jesus.

We left all that behind ages ago. Alarm bells ought to be ringing when you hear or see that. Two ongoing realities in the life of the true believer.

One, sin is an active presence, not beaten yet. And two, real love for ordinary believers believers is a reality.

[ 39 : 20 ] John's not talking perfection here, but that's not the point he's making. Sin is an active presence, real love for believers is happening.

Let me conclude. This letter is sharply discriminating. at a time of confusion, who are the people to trust?

Who are the people to listen to? Who are the people to hang out with? Well, the answer to that is, who are the people who obviously believe that still sin is still an active presence in their lives?

They are the guys to listen to. Who are the people who still depend on Jesus on a daily basis for forgiveness? They are the guys to listen to. And at a time of confusion, who are the people who are obviously acting for the good of the ordinary believer?

They are the guys to listen to. Don't listen to those other guys. Listen to them. Let's pray together. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.

[ 40 : 52 ] What a silly thing that would be to say. And the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the wonderful clarity of this letter and the carefulness with which the apostle writes to encourage the ordinary believers.

And we pray that in the same way you would help us to be wise as we read these words. We pray that you would deliver us from becoming superior people who think that we no longer need the death of Jesus in quite the same way.

We pray that you would deliver us from becoming the sort of people who look down on ordinary believers. spirits. We pray rather that you'd help us to face the reality of sin in our lives and to go on confessing it.

We pray that you would help us to love those that you love sacrificially as Jesus has done. Help us to be able to distinguish true from false at times of confusion.

[ 42 : 20 ] Hear us we pray. In Jesus name. Amen.