



LifeLight

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." John 1:4

1, 2, 3 John

LEADERS GUIDE



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Introduction

Welcome to LifeLight

A special pleasure is in store for you. You will be instrumental in leading your brothers and sisters in Christ closer to Him who is our life and light (John 1:4). You will have the pleasure of seeing fellow Christians discover new insights and rediscover old ones as they open the Scriptures and dig deep into them, perhaps deeper than they have ever dug before. More than that, you will have the pleasure of sharing in this wonderful study.

LifeLight—An In-depth Study

LifeLight is a series of in-depth Bible studies. The goal of LifeLight is that through a regular program of in-depth personal and group study of Scripture, more and more Christian adults may grow in their personal faith in Jesus Christ, enjoy fellowship with the members of His body, and reach out in love to others in witness and service.

In-depth means that this Bible study includes the following four components: individual daily home study; discussion in a small group; a lecture presentation on the Scripture portion under study; and an enhancement of the week's material (through reading the enrichment magazine).

LifeLight Participants

LifeLight participants are adults who desire a deeper study of the Scriptures than is available in the typical Sunday morning adult Bible class. (Mid-to-older teens might also be LifeLight participants.) While LifeLight does not assume an existing knowledge of the Bible or special experience or skills in Bible study, it does assume a level of commitment that will bring participants to each of the nine weekly assemblies having read the assigned readings and attempted to answer the study questions. Daily reading and study will require from 15 to 30 minutes for the five days preceding the LifeLight assembly. The day following the assembly will be spent reviewing the previous week's study by going over the completed study leaflet and the enrichment magazine.

LifeLight Leadership

While the in-depth process used by LifeLight begins with individual study and cannot achieve its aims without this individual effort, it cannot be completed by individual study alone. Therefore, trained leaders are necessary. You fill one or perhaps more of the important roles described below.

The Director

This person oversees the LifeLight program in a local center (which may be a congregation or a center operated by several neighboring congregations). The director

- serves as the parish LifeLight overall coordinator and leader;
- coordinates the scheduling of the LifeLight program;
- orders materials;
- convenes LifeLight leadership-team meetings;
- develops publicity materials;
- recruits participants;
- maintains records and budgeting;
- assigns, with the leadership-team, participants to small discussion groups;
- makes arrangements for facilities;
- communicates outreach opportunities to small-group leaders and to congregational boards;
- follows up on participants who leave the program.

The Assistant Director (optional)

This person may assist the director. Duties listed for the director may be assigned to the assistant director as mutually agreeable.

The Lecture Leader

This person prepares and delivers the lecture at the weekly assembly. (Lesson material for the lecture leader begins on p. 9.) The lecture leader

- prepares and presents the Bible study lecture to the large group;

- prepares worship activities (devotional thought, hymn, prayer), using resources in the study leaflet and leaders guide and possibly other, outside sources;
- helps the small-group discussion leaders to grow in understanding the content of the lessons;
- encourages prayer at weekly leadership-team and discussion leaders meetings.

The Small-Group Coordinator (optional; the director may fill this role)

This person supervises and coordinates the work of the small-group discussion leaders. The small-group coordinator

- recruits with the leadership-team the small-group discussion leaders;
- trains or arranges for training of the discussion leaders;
- assists the director and discussion leaders in follow-up and outreach;
- encourages the discussion leaders to contact absent group members;
- participates in the weekly leadership-team and discussion leaders equipping meetings;
- provides ongoing training and support as needed.

The Small-Group Discussion Leaders

These people guide and facilitate discussion of LifeLight participants in the small groups. (Lesson material for the small-group leaders begins on p. 51.) There should be one discussion leader for every group of no more than twelve participants. The small-group discussion leaders are, perhaps, those individuals who are most important to the success of the program. They should, therefore, be chosen with special care and be equipped with skills needed to guide discussion and to foster a caring fellowship within the group. These discussion leaders

- prepare each week for the small-group discussion by using the study leaflet and small-group leaders guide section for that session (see p. 51);
- read the enrichment magazine as a study supplement;
- guide and facilitate discussion in their small group;
- encourage and assist the discussion group in prayer;

- foster fellowship and mutual care within the discussion group;
- attend weekly discussion leaders training meetings.

Leadership Training

LifeLight leaders will meet weekly to review the previous week's work and plan the coming week. At this session, leaders can address concerns and prepare for the coming session. LifeLight is a 1½-hour program with no possibility for it to be taught in the one hour typically available on Sunday mornings. Some congregations, however, may want to use the Sunday morning Bible study hour for LifeLight preparation and leadership training. In such a meeting, the lecture leader and/or small-group coordinator may lead the discussion leaders through the coming week's lesson, reserving 5 or 10 minutes for problem solving or other group concerns.

While it requires intense effort, LifeLight has proven to bring great benefit to LifeLight participants. The effort put into this program, both by leaders and by participants, will be rewarding and profitable.

The LifeLight Weekly Schedule

Here is how LifeLight will work week by week:

1. Before Session 1, each participant will receive the study leaflet for Session 1 and the enrichment magazine for the course. The study leaflet contains worship resources (for use both in individual daily study and at the opening of the following week's assembly) and readings and study questions for five days. Challenge questions will lead those participants who have the time and desire a greater challenge into even deeper levels of study.
2. After the five days of individual study at home, participants will gather for a weekly assembly of all LifeLight participants. The assembly will begin with a brief period of worship (5 minutes). Participants will then join their assigned small discussion groups (of twelve or fewer, who will remain the same throughout the course), where they will go over the week's study questions together (55 minutes). Assembling together once again, participants will listen to a lecture presentation on the readings they have studied in the previous week and discussed in their small groups (20 minutes). After the lecture presentation, the director or another leader will distribute the study leaflet for the following week.

Closing announcements and other necessary business may take another five minutes before dismissal.

In some places some small groups will not join the weekly assembly because of scheduling or other reasons. Such groups may meet at another time and place (perhaps in the home of one of the small group's members). Those congregations may record the lecture given by the lecture leader at the weekly assembly and duplicate it for use by other groups meeting later in the week.

3. On the day following the assembly, participants will review the preceding week's work by rereading the study leaflet they completed (and that they perhaps supplemented or corrected during the discussion in their small group) and by reading appropriate articles in the enrichment magazine.

Then the LifeLight weekly study process will begin all over again!

Recommended Study Resources and Worship

The Lutheran Study Bible. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009. This resource contains more than 26,000 study and application notes, a most thorough reference guide (pp. lxxv–cx), and over 90,000 cross-references, as well as a 31,000-entry concordance, maps, charts, and timelines.

Concordia Self-Study Bible, New International Version. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986. Interpretive notes on each page form a running commentary on the text. The book includes cross-references, a 35,000-word concordance, full-color maps, charts, and timelines.

Roehrs, Walter R., and Martin H. Franzmann. *Concordia Self-Study Commentary*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. This one-volume commentary on the Bible contains 950 pages and is tailored for lay use.

The Concordia Organist is a 31-CD collection of pipe organ accompaniments for all the hymns and liturgical music in *Lutheran Service Book*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (order no. 99-2264). Use these CDs for worship hymn accompaniment.

Every Voice a Song Pipe Organ Accompaniment for 180 Hymns and Liturgy. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (order no. 99-1565). Use this music CD for worship hymn accompaniment.

The Apostle of Love

1, 2, 3 John

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

The apostle John was an eyewitness of Jesus, and he left his testimony for us in his Gospel and epistles.

Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, will

1. understand the main themes of 1, 2, and 3 John;
2. explain the reasons for believing the apostle John wrote these letters; and
3. become acquainted with John's life and times.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 51.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *The Concordia Organist*. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on p. 7.) Follow with the prayer in the study guide.

Prayer

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (LSB 308)

Lecture Presentation

Introduction

Welcome to LifeLight! In this study, we will be considering the three epistles of John. Since the word *epistle* means "letter," we can recognize these three short biblical books as having been originally written as letters sent to certain individuals. The letters are named after John because he is believed to be the human author of these divinely inspired works. Of course, most of us know the apostle John by name. We may remember a few basic facts about him: he wrote the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation; he lived longer than any other apostle; he sat next to Jesus at the Last Supper. Some may also remember that John is the brother of James, that the two left their father, Zebedee, mending nets to follow Jesus, and that they received the nickname "the Sons of Thunder." Likewise, we have a few favorite passages from John's letters; (1 John 4:19) "we love because He first loved us" comes to mind right away. However, most Christians would be at a loss to list the themes of John's letters.

That is, perhaps, not too surprising. After all, we have a tendency to spend our time studying the four Gospel accounts and Paul's letters—all too often, John's epistles fall by the wayside. This LifeLight study, therefore, will introduce us more thoroughly to John's letters, and it will guide us, regardless of whether we are quite familiar with them or have hardly ever read them, into the beautiful messages of these epistles.

In this first session of our Bible study, we will briefly review all three of these books and look at the reasons for thinking that the John who wrote them was, in fact, St. John the apostle (and not some other Christian named John). Then we will become better acquainted with this man, whom the Spirit inspired to write these tremendous letters.

1 Overview of the Letters

A brief look at the letters bearing John's name reveals some interesting facts. First, unlike other New Testament letters, 1 John does not begin with a greeting. Peter, James, Jude, and Paul open their letters with words

like, (Ephesians 1:1) “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus.” Second and Third John open “The elder to the elect lady and her children” and “The elder to the beloved Gaius,” respectively. However, 1 John lacks a greeting. Second, unlike other letters in the New Testament (except Hebrews), John’s letters do not mention the author by name. They assume the air of apostolic authority without naming the apostle. Finally, the letters display an overabundance of the word *love*—one reason why the apostle John has been called the “apostle of love.”

Just by glancing through these three short books, you may find some rather familiar passages. Those whose congregations use *Lutheran Worship* or *Lutheran Service Book*, *Divine Service*, *Setting One* will recognize 1 John 1:8–9: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Other familiar passages include John’s exhortation in 1 John 4:1 to “test the spirits” and his statement in 1 John 4:7, “let us love one another, for love is from God.” In addition to these familiar passages, you may well have your own favorite verse from one of these letters.

One of the things that is so striking about these epistles is how often the word *love* appears. In the entire New Testament, Greek words translated “love” are used 291 times; of those occurrences, 52 fall in the 7 chapters of 1–3 John, and 46 of those appear within 1 John alone. Only the Gospel of John has more occurrences of the word *love*—57 occurrences in 21 chapters. Without question, if there is one biblical book above all others that is clearly about love, 1 John is the one. Other key words in these three letters include *life* (14 occurrences), *brother* and *children* (18 occurrences apiece), *Father* (17 occurrences), *commandment* or *commandments* (18 occurrences), and *know* (38 occurrences—second only to *love*).

The contents of these three epistles, while being amazing and quite profound, can be briefly summarized. First John focuses on the relationship between the two natures in Christ (that He is both fully divine and fully human) and our love for one another. The Book of 2 John warns congregations to avoid supporting missionaries who teach false doctrine (such as those who deny the two natures in Christ). And 3 John encourages congregations to find ways to support missionaries who teach the truth.

2 Authorship of the Letters

In considering the question of who wrote these books, the first thing to do is to consider the language the author uses. How the author writes and what he writes about gives us some indications. The language of 1–3 John helps us decide whether to follow tradition in ascribing them to the apostle John. If you have some familiarity with the Gospel of John, it will not be difficult to see the similarities between the book and these epistles. Love is a significant theme in the Gospel as well as in the epistles. John’s admonition (1 John 2:15) “Do not love the world or the things in the world” echoes the words of Jesus in the Gospel, (John 17:16) “They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.” Even the opening verses of 1 John play on the opening of the Gospel. In many ways, the epistles sound very much like John’s Gospel account.

This has been commonly recognized and, in the days of the Early Church, was not seriously questioned. Historically speaking, it was not until about AD 300 that anyone suggested that a different John may have written these epistles, although earlier writers sometimes hesitated to accept that 2–3 John were written by the apostle. However, nearly every Greek manuscript with the title of these books attributes them to “John,” and many early manuscripts attribute them specifically to “John the Apostle.”

In summary, we have several reasons to believe the man who wrote these three letters is the apostle John, who also wrote the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation. First, the language of the letters resembles that of the Gospel, as do many of the main themes. Second, no early manuscript ever so much as suggested that the book was written by someone other than John the apostle. Also, we can note that no author before AD 300 proposed an alternative identity for the “elder” of 2 and 3 John. Because the books do not explicitly say they were authored by the apostle, we are free to believe otherwise but, by and large, the language of the books, their themes, and their history point us to the apostle John as their author.

3 The Life of the Apostle John

That being the case, before we dive right into these epistles, let’s first recall what we know about John the apostle. We first meet him early in the Gospel accounts, before Jesus called him to follow Him as a disciple. John

and his brother James were the sons of Zebedee. We read about them being called by Jesus in Luke 5:1–11. At that time, Jesus was on the shore of the Lake of Genesaret, preaching to a large crowd. Two boats stood at the sea's edge, and the owners were washing their nets. Jesus borrowed a boat, which belonged to Simon Peter, and had Peter put the boat out a bit from the shore so that He could preach to the whole crowd that had gathered along the water's edge. When He was finished, Jesus told Simon Peter to take the boat out even farther into the deeper water in order to do some more fishing. Soon the net was so full that Simon and his brother Andrew had to call in their partners, James and John. Once they got back to land, all four men left their fishing equipment and all the fish behind and followed Jesus. Matthew and Mark tell the story a little differently, but the point is the same: the man who would soon become the apostle John began as a fisherman working with his father and brother. Jesus called both John and his brother, and they followed Him. Shortly thereafter, Jesus went to Simon's house with Andrew, James, and John, and there Jesus healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31).

From among the Twelve, John soon emerged as a member of what could be thought of as Jesus' "inner circle." When Jesus went to heal the daughter of a synagogue ruler, He permitted only Peter, James, and John to accompany Him (Mark 5:37; Luke 8:51). Likewise, when Jesus went up on the mountain where He was to be transfigured, He took only those same three disciples: Peter, James, and John (Matthew 17:1; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28). Furthermore, it was John who accompanied Peter to prepare the borrowed Upper Room for the Passover celebration (Luke 22:8). John himself writes that he sat next to Jesus at the Last Supper (John 13:23; John 21:20–24 establishes that John is the disciple whom Jesus loved). When the disciples followed Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus again pulled aside Peter, James, and John and took them with Him a little distance from the others (Mark 14:33). Later that same night, John used his connections with the high priest to get himself and Peter into the courtyard where Jesus was being tried (John 18:15), which suggests that John came from a family of some influence. The next day, while Jesus was hanging on the cross, He commended the care of His mother, Mary, to John (John 19:25–27). In fact, of the twelve disciples, only John is mentioned by the Scriptures as witnessing the crucifixion. Finally, after Jesus' death and resurrection, when Mary Magdalene found that the tomb was empty, (John 20:2) "she

ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved [John], and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.'"

Because of his status among the apostles, John would have seen much that other apostles would not have seen. He looked on as Jesus healed people and raised the dead. He witnessed our Lord's glory when Jesus was transfigured. He sat next to Jesus at the Last Supper. In Jesus' day, people at a common meal reclined on couches or benches around a low table, and each leaned on the next. John therefore literally touched Jesus at the Last Supper, and when "Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus" who was going to betray Him (John 13:24), John would simply have needed to turn his head around to pose the question. All of this brings great meaning to John's words in 1 John 1:1–4: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands." John literally heard Jesus' voice when Jesus said, "Follow Me." John literally saw Jesus' glory with his own eyes when Jesus was transfigured. John literally touched Jesus at the Last Supper. John truly had an insider's view of the life and ministry of Jesus.

Unfortunately, John's insider status probably went to his head. According to Mark, (9:38) "John said to [Jesus], 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us'" (see also Luke 9:49). Apparently, he didn't want Jesus to have any competition. John was being protective of Jesus' status—almost like a show-business agent who files for an injunction because someone else is doing his client's routine. Later, (Luke 9:52–54) Jesus "sent messengers ahead of Him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for Him. But the people did not receive Him. . . . And when His disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do You want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?'" James and John displayed a bold faith, to be sure, but their desire to protect Jesus' status got the better of them. Luke records that (9:55) "[Jesus] turned and rebuked them"; it was not yet time for God to pour out His wrath on those who rejected Jesus, because Jesus still had to carry God's wrath against all sinners at the cross of Golgotha. These kinds of behaviors are probably what earned John and his brother James the nickname "the Sons of Thunder."

Perhaps the most well-known episode in the life of John is the time when he and his brother (encouraged

by their overly ambitious mother) asked Jesus, (Mark 10:37) “Grant us to sit, one at Your right hand and one at Your left, in Your glory” (also Matthew 20:20–21). This was after the transfiguration, so James and John had an idea what Jesus’ glory would look like. They were two of the only three living people to see the transfiguration (the other being Peter), so they had some hope that they might get the number one and number two spots. Naturally, the other apostles were indignant at James and John, and Jesus used the opportunity to teach all His apostles a lesson, not only about leadership, but most important about the kingdom of heaven: (Matthew 20:25–28) “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” While John did not understand Jesus’ lesson at the time, he would eventually learn that serving as a leader in the Church involved great sacrifice.

We also know that John retained a leading role among the apostles even after Jesus’ ascension into heaven. Acts 3:1–11 recounts how Peter and John were going to the temple to pray when a man who was lame from birth asked them for alms. Peter said, (Acts 3:6) “I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” And when the man stood and walked, he very naturally followed Peter and John because they had healed him. Peter, meanwhile, delivered a sermon in the temple, which got him and John thrown into prison overnight. The next day, the religious leaders demanded an explanation from them, and Peter preached another sermon. (Acts 4:13) “Now when [the leaders] saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.” Peter and John were set free with a warning not to preach Jesus’ name again—a warning which they, of course, ignored. We also see John’s leadership recognized later on when both he and Peter were sent to Samaria to investigate a report that some Samaritans had become believers through Philip’s preaching (Acts 8:14). Finally, even the apostle Paul bears witness to John’s leading role, writing, (Galatians 2:9) “when James and Cephas [Peter] and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go

to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised” (but note that this James who Paul here refers to is the brother of Jesus, not the brother of John). Paul notes that John was one who was regarded as a pillar of the Church.

However, the price of leadership in the Early Church was high. (Acts 12:1–3) “Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.” Unlike the other eleven apostles, John did not lose his life to persecution. Tradition tells us that he lived in Ephesus for several years, until the Emperor Domitian exiled him to the island of Patmos. There he was given a vision of the things to come (Revelation 1:9). This is the book we call the Revelation of St. John. According to church tradition, John returned to Ephesus after the death of Domitian, and he lived there until about AD 100, when he died a natural death at an advanced age, the last remaining apostle and eyewitness of the life and ministry of Jesus.

Conclusion

As we study the three epistles of John, we will be presented with the very love of God—here in the epistles of love written by the apostle of love, John. That this John—the apostle—was the John who wrote the three letters by that name is all but certain. And as we study these three epistles, we can bear in mind that they were given to us by God through the hand of John the apostle, and not someone else with whom we are not familiar. John is a man whom we come to know very well through our reading of the four Gospel accounts—especially the one he wrote himself. Also in the books of Acts and Revelation, we see that our Lord Christ continued to use John in very obvious and noteworthy ways while the message of Christ’s fulfillment of the Gospel promise was first being spread. And most important for us—our Lord continues to spread this message of salvation in the same way today: through the apostle John (by means of his writings) to each one of us.

Concluding Activities

Speak a closing prayer, make any necessary announcements, and distribute study leaflet 2.

Getting to Know God . . . and Yourself

1 John 1:1–2:2

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

We know ourselves fully only when we know ourselves in the light of Christ: as sinners forgiven by God.

Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, will

1. explain how 1 John 1 affirms the doctrine of Christ's two natures;
2. give a spiritual rather than a social definition of fellowship; and
3. come to know themselves as sinners forgiven by God for Christ's sake.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 53.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *The Concordia Organist*. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on p. 7.) Follow with the prayer in the study guide.

Prayer

Gracious God and Lord, apart from You we cannot know ourselves rightly, and apart from the Gospel we cannot know You rightly. Teach us to know ourselves aright, as sinful creatures who do not deserve Your love, and teach us to know You aright, as the God who in love gave Your

Son into death to give us life. By Your Holy Spirit, move us to confess our sins, and ever grant us Your forgiveness through Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

Lecture Presentation

Introduction

In this session, we will begin our consideration of John's first epistle. First John begins with a prologue that beautifully portrays God's love for you—a love that even moved Him to send you eternal life in Jesus Christ. What God revealed to the apostles, John now proclaims to you in his letter. This life that he proclaims does truly amazing things for you. It gives you true knowledge of yourself. It assures you of God's forgiveness. It brings you into a lasting, and even eternal, fellowship with God the Father. And since God works on us through His Word (just as St. Paul wrote in Romans 10:17: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ"), we can take comfort from knowing that our study of John's epistle accomplishes his purpose in writing. Through this study of the Word of God, we will be strengthened and encouraged in our fellowship with John and all Christians, because through faith in the Son, we have fellowship with God the Father.

1 Fellowship with God: 1 John 1:1–4

The prologue at the beginning of chapter 1 consists of verses 1–4. In just four short verses, John expresses two themes for this letter. The first is John's desire to pass on what he had received, and the second is us enjoying fellowship both with other Christians and with God.

John begins at "the beginning." These words echo both John's Gospel and the Book of Genesis. In both of those books, the word *beginning* refers to the creation of the world. By proclaiming in the Gospel that the Word was in the beginning, John confesses that Jesus participated with the Father in creating the world. This means that the man who walked the roads of Palestine, who healed the sick and gave sight to the blind, who was crucified on a cross and rose from the dead—He did all these acts of love for you because He is the Second Person of the Trinity, who created our human race and even the

entire world around us. His love for you goes back to creation—back to the very beginning. There was never a time when God the Son did not love you. There will never be a time when He will stop loving you.

Here at the start of the Book of 1 John, this confession of God's love is amplified by referring to (1:1) "that which was from the beginning." Now there are some scholars who suggest that verse 1 refers to the message that Christ's disciples heard from Him. Certainly it is true that the word *beginning* can have this connotation, as it does in 1 John 2:24 and 3:11, which refer to "what you heard from the beginning" and "the message that you have heard from the beginning." However, several arguments speak in favor of understanding "that which was from the beginning" in 1 John 1:1 as referring to Jesus Christ who was from all eternity. We can look at this from a standpoint of grammar. First, "Him who is from the beginning" is used in 1 John 2:13–14 to refer to God. Both in 1 John 1:1 and 1 John 2:13–14, the prepositional phrase "from the beginning" is used as an adjective. This differs from the other six times John uses this phrase, when he uses it as an adverb (1 John 2:7, 24; 3:8, 11; 2 John 5, 6). This similar usage of "from the beginning" in both 1 John 1:1 and 1 John 2:13–14 suggests that we should understand the two of them in the same way.

Moreover, the verbs in verse 1 imply something more concrete than simply a message. John had heard, seen, looked upon, and even touched "that which was from the beginning." Note how carefully John explains the apostles' seeing and touching. They saw "with their eyes" and they "touched with [their] hands." Talking about eyes and hands implies literal seeing and touching. The fact the apostles saw Jesus in the flesh before His death and after His resurrection is a vital component of their witness. What they witnessed firsthand (see also Acts 1:20–22), they bore witness to among those who did not see. The same is true, though to a lesser degree, of touching. When Jesus appeared to all the disciples after His resurrection, He invited them, "Touch Me, and see" (Luke 24:39). Likewise, Jesus invited Thomas to touch His wounds.

Finally, verse 2 refers to the life that was "with the Father" and was manifested to us. The language here is quite reminiscent of John 1:1: "The Word was with God." Because verse 2 uses the same phrase as John 1:1, "that which was from the beginning" probably refers to Him who is our eternal life, Jesus Christ.

What wonderful comfort for us all! These same men

who heard the voice of God in Christ, who saw His glory with their own eyes, and who even touched God in Christ, now proclaim Christ to you in the Scriptures. What they witnessed during the days of Jesus' earthly ministry they now testify to in their writings so that you may have eternal life. This means that our faith is not based on a myth or on someone's opinion, but instead is grounded on actual events that occurred within recorded history. Ours is a faith that has been passed on to us by God through these men who had firsthand experience of Jesus in the flesh.

John states his goal in verse 3: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us." John wanted those who read his letter to enjoy fellowship with him and the other apostles, because their fellowship is with the Father and the Son. When we hear the word *fellowship*, we are likely to think of a social time at church. While our friendships at church are important, John points to a far deeper reality here. The Greek word for *fellowship* (*koinonia*) appears nineteen times in seventeen verses in the New Testament (although words based on *koinos* are used much more often). In each case, the word implies a union or partnership. Often it refers to the collection that Paul took for famine relief (Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13). In that instance, donors became partners in the suffering of the Jerusalem Christians. In 1 Corinthians 10:16, the word is used of the Lord's Supper: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation [*koinonia*] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation [*koinonia*] in the body of Christ?" By drinking the wine and eating the bread of Communion, we are united with the blood and body of Christ. Those who receive it in faith receive its benefits. The word *fellowship* in 1 John has a similar meaning. Fellowship with the apostle refers to the spiritual union we have through faith in Christ, a union in which we share one another's burdens and receive benefits from one another as the Body of Christ. To have fellowship with the Father means receiving the benefits He delivers through His Son, Jesus, namely, the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

For this reason, when we read of *fellowship* in 1 John, we can recognize that it doesn't mean merely making friendships or drinking coffee at church, but rather it refers to something of far greater significance. It refers to our union with one another through God the Father in Christ. Our lives together in Christian congregations grow out of God's love for us. The Spirit gathers

us around the Good News of Jesus Christ, and through that message, He brings us into fellowship with the Father. Our further social activities grow out of our fellowship with one another in Christ Jesus. If ever we lose sight of the basis of our fellowship, we stand in danger of replacing God's love with our own efforts to establish friendships. A fellowship based on our own efforts can only come to ruin, but a fellowship that grows out of God's love in Christ transcends space and time, and it will even prevail over the gates of hell. It is the greatest joy of the apostles—and especially of the apostle John—to bring others into this fellowship.

2 Life in the Light: 1 John 1:5–10

The body of the letter begins in verse 5. John again points out that he is proclaiming a message that he himself heard “from Him”—referring either to Christ or to God the Father through Christ. Our gracious Father proclaims to peoples of all times and all places the message that brings us into fellowship with Him. He proclaims that message through His apostles today in the Scriptures, and He also proclaims it today through pastors and other Christians who tell others what they have heard concerning that Word of life.

John's proclamation is this: (1 John 1:5) “God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.” Those who have fellowship with God expect that His light will shine in their lives to reveal what they would not otherwise see. The remainder of chapter 1 aims to shine God's light into your life by bringing you to a deeper knowledge of yourself through God's revelation of your sin and His love. These last five verses consist of five sentences, each of which begins with “if we.” They form two groups: two verses continue the theme of light and darkness, and then three address the topic of sin.

Verses 6 and 7 make a kind of trap. Verse 6 begins, “If we say we have fellowship with [God].” Most of us would say, “Yes, I have fellowship with God through Jesus.” John draws us in by starting with a statement all Christians affirm. He then adds a second condition: “while we walk in darkness.” John moves very subtly. He does not accuse anyone of walking in darkness. He simply invites us to reply, “That's not me. I am not walking in the darkness.” The remainder of verse 6 lays the groundwork for the trap: “we lie and do not practice the truth.” Most of us would say that the sentence does not apply to us. We have fellowship with God, but we are not walking in darkness, so we are not liars. The trap is set.

Verse 7 springs the trap. Again, John begins with a condition most Christians would say they meet: “if we walk in the light, as He is in the light.” He then explains what that entails: “we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.” I can claim to be walking in the light only if I have fellowship with other Christians and I have sins. If I am not sharing fellowship with others in the Church, then I am walking in darkness, and I have to face the fact that I may not have fellowship with God. Fellowship with God and fellowship with other Christians go hand in hand.

The next two verses are familiar from *Lutheran Worship* and *Lutheran Service Book*: (1 John 1:8–9) “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” In the worship service, these verses call you to admit your sin, because our Savior is gracious to those who confess their sins and trust Him for forgiveness. In the worship service, however, they lose some of the power they have in their original context. In 1 John, they serve along with verse 10 as a second trap that drives us toward a knowledge of ourselves that we can acquire only by God's grace.

Verse 8 picks up where verse 7 left off. If an individual claims to have no sin for Jesus to cleanse, then the individual is deceiving himself. To claim to be without sin is to deceive yourself not only about your thoughts, words, and deeds, but about your very nature. Therefore, anyone who claims to be without sin is lacking truth, that is, our Savior, Jesus, who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Notice how verse 8 creates a terrible dilemma: either you claim to have sin, that is, to be the kind of creature who is sinful to the core, or you deceive yourself.

Verse 9 changes the terms again, offering a way out of the terrible dilemma: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” God does not point out our sin in order to make us feel bad about our true identity. He shows us what we really are so we can be ready to hear the good news about who God really is: the One who is faithful and just. He forgives sins, cleanses us from unrighteousness, and gives us the life that was with Him from the beginning, namely, our Savior, Jesus Christ. With this offer of forgiveness, we can concur in God's judgment that we have sins and that we are sinners. We can embrace this fact about ourselves—not as

something to be celebrated, but as the truth about ourselves that is overcome by the One who is the way, the truth, and the life. Without this promise of forgiveness, the truth would simply be too painful to admit.

Verse 10 finishes the trap in case anyone is left who wishes to claim that he has no sins to confess: “If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His Word is not in us.” If I refuse to embrace the truth about myself, then I am not simply deceiving myself; I am calling God a liar. For any believer, that would be a blasphemous thought: if God is God, then He will not lie to us. To claim to be without sin, then, keeps God’s Word from dwelling in us. That would be a rather dangerous business.

3 Forgiven Sinners: 1 John 2:1–2

As this epistle continues into chapter 2, we see that John addresses the readers very much in the vein of a good pastor, indeed even in the manner of the Good Shepherd Himself. Although it might seem quite satisfying to do so, John knows he cannot simply bludgeon us with the condemnations of God’s Law. Christians become Christians, and Christians are preserved in the faith in Christ, through the hearing of the good news of forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

John therefore draws the first main section of the letter to a close by reminding us of our forgiveness: (1 John 2:1–2) “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. 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.” Forgiveness is not permission to sin, but the fact is that we will sin. That is precisely why Jesus Christ came into the world—because we sin and stand under the power of sin. He came to offer His life as the sacrifice that wins forgiveness for each and every human being. He is, therefore, our advocate before the Father.

We ought to avoid sin. That should be pretty much self-evident to us. After all, our trespasses separate us from God and lead into eternal death. Yet at the same time, we need not despair when we do sin, because Jesus has already won eternal life for us. This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of the Christian faith to understand intellectually, but through the receiving of forgiveness, we begin to understand it better.

As we continue on each day of our lives, we try not to sin, because we know that our sins offend God. Yet,

when we do sin—when we do cause God offense—we know that we can be confident to approach God with our sins, for we know that He forgives us absolutely. No matter how hard we try, we know that out of our weaknesses we stumble and fall. It is true that each of us is a sinner, but we are sinners redeemed and forgiven by God for Christ’s sake.

Conclusion

It is common these days for young people to spend years and years in school getting an education. We pass through eight years of study to get into high school, then four years in high school, then four more years in college, and maybe even more if we go beyond and study for a few more years in graduate school. We may have as much as twenty years of education! And yet although we may have learned so much, we may know precious little about ourselves.

The reformer Martin Luther observed that we cannot know our sinfulness apart from God’s revelation in Christ. This very clearly is John’s intent in the beginning of his first epistle. By leading us to desire fellowship with God through Christ Jesus, John then leads us to confess our sinfulness, that we may then receive God’s forgiveness in Christ and enjoy that eternal fellowship with Him.

John begins this epistle by giving us Christians true knowledge of ourselves. As John guides us to see for ourselves, we are sinful creatures whom God loved enough to give eternal life through Jesus Christ. Knowing and believing those words is the essence of the Christian faith. While, on the other hand, believing that we are not sinful is to walk in darkness. Also rejecting the love of God is likewise to live in darkness. But thanks be to God, when these two truths come together, we know ourselves rightly: we are sinners who are heirs of eternal life in Christ.

Concluding Activities

Speak a closing prayer, make any necessary announcements, and distribute study leaflet 3.