

## Focal Text

1 John 1:1—2:2

## Background

1 John 1:1—2:2

## Main Idea

The gospel of God's really coming in human flesh in his Son Jesus Christ demands that we live faithfully for him.

## Question to Explore

If God really came in Jesus, how should that affect how we live?

## Study Aim

To identify implications for my life of the meaning of God's coming in Jesus Christ

## Study and Action Emphases

- Affirm the Bible as our authoritative guide for life and ministry
- Share the gospel with all people
- Develop a growing, vibrant faith
- Obey and serve Jesus by meeting physical, spiritual, and emotional needs

# LESSON ONE

# Really Living for the God Who Really Came

## Quick Read

Jesus said, "But wisdom is proved right by her actions" (Matthew 11:19). An old saying echoes the words of Jesus: "Actions speak louder than words." Saying it is easy. Doing it is a lot harder.



## 1, 2, 3 JOHN: Measuring Authentic Christianity

Several years ago a friend who was a middle-school teacher and football coach related a funny but insightful story to me. An eighth-grade boy came to school every day for the first part of the year unkempt and shabbily dressed. The coach had spoken to him about his appearance without any success. About halfway through the year, however, this youngster showed up for class one day wearing clean and pressed clothing. His hair was neatly combed, and his teeth had been brushed.

After observing this for about two weeks, the coach called the boy's mother on the telephone to inquire about the sudden change in her child's appearance. The mother laughed and told the coach that the change came about because her son had his first girlfriend. No amount of talking had been able to change this young man. It took a meaningful experience with another person.

### 1 John 1:1—2:2

<sup>1</sup>That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. <sup>2</sup>The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. <sup>3</sup>We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>We write this to make our joy complete.

<sup>5</sup>This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup>If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. <sup>7</sup>But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

<sup>8</sup> If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup>If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup>If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

<sup>2:1</sup>My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. <sup>2</sup>He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

## Does Matter Matter? (1:1)

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Matter matters to the writer of 1 John. He began the letter by stressing that “we have heard,” “we have seen with our eyes,” “we have looked at,” and “our hands have touched” (1:1). John put himself in the company of others in his testimony to the physical reality of Jesus Christ. The “we” of this letter represents the community of faith of which the writer was a part. The letter emphasizes the beliefs that had shaped this community in order to defend it against division and false doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

Why would it be so important to emphasize the physical nature of Jesus? Why did matter matter? One of the emerging philosophies that threatened the early church during the first three centuries was Gnosticism. The word *gnostic* is from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning knowledge. This teaching was built on the premise that all matter, all material substance, is evil and that the non-material, the spirit, is good. Therefore, Jesus could not have been a physical being and God at the same time. Since God was spiritual and good, God could not dwell in a fleshly, material, and thus sinful, body. According to one group of Gnostics, called Docetic Gnostics, Jesus only appeared to be physical. The word *docetic* is from the Greek word *dokeo*, meaning *to appear or to seem*. The Gnostic heresy was dangerous because it would lead to “a denial of a good creation, a real incarnation, and the resurrection of the body.”<sup>2</sup>

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It was important to the writer of 1 John and to the community of believers that Jesus was real flesh-and-blood matter. A real flesh-and-blood Jesus is important to us today because Jesus thus can identify with our own humanity. The writer of Hebrews says, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). Matter does matter!

Some believers today tend to deny the physical or human nature of Jesus. Jesus, though, was fully human and fully divine. This is a wonderful mystery of God. Yet, other believers would acknowledge only the divinity of Jesus without recognizing the humanity of Jesus. Denying the humanity of Jesus can lead to an otherworldly spirituality that does not deal honestly with the struggles of our own humanity. It is possible to be physical and spiritual at the same time. Matter does matter!

## 1, 2, 3 JOHN: Measuring Authentic Christianity

A real flesh-and-blood Jesus is important to us today, too, because we hope in Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Jesus died and was buried. After

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three days God raised Jesus from the dead. Paul wrote, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:19–20). A real flesh-and-blood Jesus gives every believer hope for life beyond the grave. If the

flesh and blood of Jesus could die and yet Jesus could be raised from the dead, then we can look beyond the death of our own flesh and blood to eternal life. Matter matters!

What Jesus taught worked for him and will work for us. His coming in human flesh demands that we who believe in Jesus as Savior live faithfully for him.

### Does the Message Matter? (1:2–2:2)

The message mattered to the writer and to the community because it came from the real Jesus. They had literally heard with their own ears the

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## Word of Life

"The Word of life" may well be the main subject of the first chapter of 1 John, if not of the letter as a whole. This is how the letter begins (1:1). It ends with a similar emphasis, Jesus as "eternal life" (5:13, 20). Jesus is the embodiment of the "Word of life," and it is that message which is proclaimed about Jesus.

The Greek word *logos* is translated "word." It is used in 1 John 1:1 and also in John 1:1–4 to describe the coming of Jesus in the flesh. Jesus is the theological expression ("word") of the invisible God. What we see in the life of Jesus is the clearest picture of God revealed in history. God chose to put on flesh (referring to the incarnation) so that he could verbalize himself to human beings.

Jesus is described in John 1:1–4 as the Word "in the beginning" before anything was made, and in 1 John 1:1 as the Word seen and heard "from the beginning," the beginning of the Christian community. The world was created by the Word, and the Christian community also was created by the Word. Jesus, "the Word of life," is the life and light of both creation and the Christian community.

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message from his lips (1:5). This message came from the one called “the Word of life” (1:1), “the eternal life” (1:2), and the Father’s “Son, Jesus Christ” (1:3). The letter insists on the historical reality of the incarnation of God in the flesh of Jesus. The source of the message gave validity to the message.

My father used to say to me, “Son, consider the source.” This sage advice taught me that not every message carries the same weight or authority. The authority of the message of 1 John was none other than Jesus, the Son of God.

The message matters to us because it declares that “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (1:5). Light and darkness are mutually exclusive; therefore, God and evil are mutually exclusive. The writer emphasized this idea by using a Greek expression that is translated into English as “no darkness at all,” with “at all” added to “no.”

The message matters to us because of the challenge to “walk in the light, as he is in the light” (1:7). Belief and behavior go hand in hand. To walk in the light is to be true to one’s belief in God. Christian behavior cannot be divorced from Christian belief.

These verses make three arguments against the notion that behavior doesn’t matter. Verse 6 asserts that it is not possible to be in right relationship with God while behaving sinfully. Verse 8 asserts that sinful behavior is sinful whether we admit it or not. Verse 10 asserts that sinful behavior that tries to pass as righteousness makes God a liar and makes God’s word useless in our lives.

If we walk in the light, though, we have the assurance that our sins have been paid for by the death of Jesus Christ and that Jesus continues to be our defender before God (1:7; 2:1–2). The blood of Jesus and the atoning sacrifice referred to in 2:2 bring to mind the Old Testament sacrifice of animals in recognition of the price of sin. Blood was regarded as the force of life (Leviticus 17:11). Life was sacrificed to atone (pay) for sin. The crucifixion of Jesus and the shedding of his blood purifies (continuous present verb form meaning *keeps on purifying us*) from “all” sin (1 John 1:7). This idea of continuous purification and forgiveness is reinforced in 2:1, with the idea, “We have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.”

The message matters because sin is real and forgiveness is necessary.

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*A real flesh-and-blood Jesus gives every believer hope for life beyond the grave.*

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## 1, 2, 3 JOHN: Measuring Authentic Christianity

### Do Others Matter? (1:3–7)

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Others matter as a witness to the authenticity of one's profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Verses 6–7 indicate that fellowship with others is a result of walking in the light. The word translated “fellowship” is the Greek word *koinonia*. The word means *to share something in common with another, to be a partner*.

The fellowship of the believing community is “with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1:3) and with one another. The purpose of proclaiming the message is to bring people into fellowship with Jesus and into fellowship with the saved community (1:3).

Some proclaim the message of Jesus in a way that causes division. This writer said that “we proclaim” the message as a way of bringing people together (1:3). Salvation is new birth into a new family.

One of the best ways to see how a believer is getting along with God is to see how that believer is getting along with others. When Jesus was asked about the greatest of the commandments, he responded by saying, “Love the

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Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37–40).

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34–35).

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## Case Study

Robert joined his father-in-law's business after graduating from college. Robert and his wife Sue also attended the same church with Sue's parents. Sue's father was an active member and leader in the church. During the first year of employment, Robert noticed that some of his father-in-law's business practices were dishonest. Robert was faced with a dilemma. He could remain quiet and go along to keep his job. He could move his membership to another church. He could talk to his father-in-law about what he had observed. He could talk to his wife about the problem. How would you advise Robert? Why?

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Others matter if we want to have joy in the believing community (1:4, 7). It is clear that the writer wants others to come into the community (1:3) so that together they can rejoice in their common relationship with Jesus Christ.

Fellowship in the believing community is more than church socials. Verse 3 expresses the desire that “you also may have fellowship with us.” To “have fellowship” is more than simply *to fellowship*. To “have fellowship” means to share in common in the blessings and challenges of the Christian life because of a mutual relationship with Jesus Christ. Through a spiritual sharing of faith in Jesus Christ, our physical sharing with each other provides joy.

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One commentator points out, “Where fellowship is only partial, joy can never be complete.”<sup>3</sup> Our fellowship with others is rooted in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ rather than in what we deserve or even in what we can do for others. Each one of us has been included in God’s fellowship through God’s grace and our faith in his Son Jesus Christ. Inclusion in the fellowship is nothing we have earned or deserved. It is God’s gift to us.

Helping bring others into the fellowship should be out of gratitude for what God has done for us. Behavior that excludes others from the fellowship of the believing community originates in darkness and not in the light.

## **The Message for Us**

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The coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh matters. What Jesus taught and what the early believing community heard matters. How we relate to others as a result of the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh matters.

Christian belief and Christian behavior cannot be separated. Walking in the light is a living testimony of believing in the light. To say that we believe in the light while walking in the darkness is to lie, deceive ourselves, make God a liar, and render God’s word useless in our lives. To walk in the light is to experience the joy of fellowship with God and with other believers. The coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh matters.

## 1, 2, 3 JOHN: Measuring Authentic Christianity

### QUESTIONS

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1. What are some reasons people give to deny that Jesus came in the flesh?
2. What are some of the excuses people give for unrighteous behavior?
3. What are some ways in which believers can walk in the light?
4. What are some ways that people exclude others from Christian fellowship?
5. What are some ways that believers can include others in Christian fellowship?

### NOTES

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1. R. Alan Culpepper, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John*, Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 8.
2. Dale Moody, *The Letters of John* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1970), 15.
3. Culpepper, 11.