

Lesson One: 1 John 1 According to Grace

Introduction

AUTHOR: 1 John is written by the apostle John who was one of the original twelve disciples. He was brother to James, and they were the sons of Zebedee. Jesus called James and John the “Sons of Thunder”. It was their mother who asked that her two sons would sit on his right and left in His kingdom. James was killed by the sword by Herod (Acts 12:2). John outlived all of the original twelve disciples and wrote the Gospel of John and recorded the visions of the book of Revelation.

TIME OF WRITING: Approximately AD 85-95

Irenaeus, a disciple of John’s disciple Polycarp, tells us that the apostle continued in the church at Ephesus until the times of Trajan (AD 98-117). Clearly the apostle lived to a great age. He would therefore have experienced exceptional authority as the only remaining apostolic link with the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus, and these letters may well be the last of the canonical Scriptures to be written, probably during the decade AD 85-95. Jackman, D. (1988). The message of John’s letters: living in the love of God (p. 12). Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

INTENDED AUDIENCE: There are three possibilities.**1) Christians Only (the usual assumption)**

- *This chapter cannot be written exclusively to Christians, because John (and his people), are inviting this group to whom he’s writing to join them in fellowship.*

2) Any Non-Christian

- *Since faith in Jesus, NOT confession of sins (1 Jn. 1:9), is the Biblical pattern of salvation (Romans 10:9-10, Acts 16:31, Acts 8:35-37, Eph. 2:8-10, Acts 15:9) this chapter cannot be addressed to just ANYONE who did not have fellowship with God (non-believers).*

3) A Specific Known Group

- *The only logical conclusion is that 1 John 1 is addressed primarily to a specific group of non-believers who thought they were not in need of forgiveness because they had already become morally perfect through their superior enlightenment (Gnosticism).*

THE AUDIENCE: To the church and false teachers among them (Gnostics)

The first letter is directed to a specific situation in the churches, where false prophets have separated themselves and their followers from the main body of believers (2:19) and so divided the church. Their reasons for this action seem to have centered on their claim to a special ‘anointing’ (chrisma) of the Holy Spirit, by which they had been given true knowledge of God (2:20, 27). This knowledge (gnōsis) became the centre of their distinctive beliefs and lifestyle. Eventually these tendencies developed into a widespread and varied movement to which scholars have given the generic title ‘gnosticism’. Jackman, D. (1988). The message of John’s letters: living in the love of God (p. 13). Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

One of the gnostic teachers active in Ephesus at this time was a man called Cerinthus. A Jew, from Egypt, he sought to combine Old Testament ideas with

gnostic philosophy, **rejecting all of Paul's letters** and accepting only parts of Matthew and Mark from the New Testament writings. Jackman, D. (1988). *The message of John's letters: living in the love of God* (pp. 13-14). Leicester, England; Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Among the many strands of gnostic belief, we can note **two major ones** which are vital to our understanding of John's context. The first is the **exaltation of the mind**, and therefore of this speculative knowledge, over faith and behaviour. The second is the **conviction that matter is essentially evil** because the physical world is the product of an evil power. Jackman, D. (1988). *The message of John's letters: living in the love of God* (p. 14). Leicester, England; Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

First, they **denied the incarnation** of Christ (2:22; 4:2-3). It was a logical deduction from their belief that matter was evil. How could the supreme deity condescend to be united with an impure physical body, as a man? To get around the obvious historicity of Christ, men like Cerinthus seem to have propounded the theory known as **docetism** (from dokein, to seem). According to this teaching the divine Word, the heavenly Christ, did not truly become man. He only seemed to have a human form, and there were those who maintained that Christ's body throughout his earthly life was a phantom. Others were prepared to admit the reality of the body of Jesus, but separated Jesus from the Christ. The earthly Jesus was born and suffered, but the Christ did not unite himself with Jesus until the baptism, and withdrew again before the passion and the cross. Jackman, D. (1988). *The message of John's letters: living in the love of God* (p. 14). Leicester, England; Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Here the claim of the false teachers was to have **attained moral perfection through their superior enlightenment**. They no longer sinned. Jackman, D. (1988). *The message of John's letters: living in the love of God* (p. 15). Leicester, England; Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

These letters therefore are dealing with matters of the utmost crucial importance for the churches. **Gnostic teaching struck at the root of all Christian teaching, in both Old and New Testaments**. They denied that God was the creator of the material universe, denying that it was 'very good' (Gn. 1:31), and claiming that it was essentially evil and inferior. This led them to **deny the reality of Christ's incarnation, atoning death and bodily resurrection, and with that to redefine sin and redirect Christian behaviour**. It is not surprising that John recognized in such a frontal attack 'the spirit of the antichrist ... already in the world' (4:3) Jackman, D. (1988). *The message of John's letters: living in the love of God* (pp. 15-16). Leicester, England; Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

WHY UNDERSTANDING THE AUDIENCE OF 1 JOHN IS SO IMPORTANT?

- Because the audience of this letter is not always taken into consideration, many false beliefs/teachings have been derived which are in contradiction to what Paul taught about the New Covenant. These are the false conclusions made:
 - 1) *Our righteousness (right-standing with God) is not permanent. Another way this is stated is that we have a righteous "standing" with God, but not an "actual" righteousness.*
 - 2) *Sin must be continually confessed in order to be forgiven.*
 - 3) *Confession of sin is the way to become righteous and maintain our righteousness.*
 - 4) *Repentance and forsaking sin are required to be "right" with God.*

- 5) *Sin breaks fellowship with God. We can't "enter His presence" with unconfessed sin.*
- 6) *Confession of sin restores fellowship with God.*
- 7) *Our old sin nature is alive and well.*
- Without a correct understanding of 1 John 1, we cannot accurately teaching the marvels of the New Covenant (complete and total removal of sin and sin consciousness).

PURPOSE OF THE LETTER

1) So believers will know that they have eternal life

1 John 5:13

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

2) So that the unbelievers among them, the Gnostics, might join in their fellowship.

1 John 1:3

What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us.

Verses 1-4

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—² and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—³ what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. ⁴ These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

1. **Verse 1: In verse one, John makes clear what he wishes to share with the reader.¹**
 - a. "What was from the beginning". By "beginning" he is not merely speaking of the beginning of Jesus' life on earth, but declaring that Jesus is God and was with God from the beginning.
 - b. John declares that the life of Christ was not something imagined. He and those with Him had seen Jesus, they looked at Him and touched Him with their own hands (before and after His resurrection).
 - c. The "Word of Life" refers to Jesus. John is testifying to the readers about Jesus.
2. **Verse 2: "The life" refers to "the eternal life. The life was manifested. John and those with him are personally experiencing this eternal life and are proclaiming the eternal life with the reader. This is the life that was manifested (shown) to them.**

John 17:3

This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

¹ Numbered points correspond with the number of the verses.

1 John 5:13

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Bob George wrote, “Jesus did not come to make a bad person good, or a good person better. He came to make a dead person alive.”

3. Verse 3: He repeats the personal testimony which he has seen and heard, proclaiming it to the reader (also).

- a. Why? Why is John proclaiming this to the reader? It is “so that you TOO may have fellowship with us.
- b. This makes clear that this chapter is directed to those who did not have fellowship with believers. He is writing so that they may have fellowship—that they may also know the truth and be saved.
- c. Our fellowship is with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ—so it is not correct her to say that this refers to John wanting to get to know the reader better or to becomes friends. He is plainly stating with whom they have fellowship AND that the reader does not currently share this fellowship with the Father and the Son.

Vs 3 The word fellowship (koinōnia) is an interesting one. Used in classical Greek as a favourite expression for the marriage relationship, the most intimate bond between human beings, it is particularly appropriate to describe the Christian’s personal relationship with God and with his fellow believers as here, and later in verses 6 and 7. Jackman, D. (1988). The message of John’s letters: living in the love of God (pp. 23-24). Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

There is no other way into genuine membership of the body of Christ, into true fellowship with God, than by believing the apostolic testimony. You cannot know God without knowing Christ. You cannot know fellowship without receiving the truth. Jackman, D. (1988). The message of John’s letters: living in the love of God (p. 24). Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

4. Verse 4: Our joy is made complete when those whom we love share in our fellowship with the Father and the Son.

Verses 5-7

This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; ⁷ but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

5. Verse 5: John is announcing a message to the readers. It is a message which He heard directly from Jesus.

- a. God is light.
- b. In Him there is no darkness at all.

6. Verse 6: A person cannot say that they have fellowship with Jesus and still be walking in darkness. That person is a liar and is not practicing the truth. That person is not a Christian.
7. Verse 7: But the person who does walk in the Light, those people have fellowship with each other.
- a. Those who don't walk in the light, do not have fellowship with each other. They are not saved. John's purpose for sharing this information was already stated in verse three—namely, that the readers could have fellowship with them and their fellowship is with the Father and the Son.)
 - b. The blood of Jesus is cleansing those who have fellowship with the Father and Son from ALL sin.
 - 1) Cleanses: katharizei G2511 vi Pres Act 3 Sg, IS-cleansING
 - 2) All: pasEs G3956 a_ Gen Sg f, EVERY
 - 3) This is in agreement with the truth stated clearly elsewhere in Scripture.
Hebrew 10:11-14
Every priest stands **daily** ministering and offering **time after time** the same sacrifices, which can **never take away** sins; ¹² but He, having offered **one sacrifice for sins for all time**, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, ¹³ waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. ¹⁴ **For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.**
 - c. It is commonly taught that “walking in the light” has to do with holy living, and even worse, that not “walking in the light” results in our sins not being forgiven. The heresy behind these beliefs is that nothing of great value was accomplished at the cross, that our sins were not forgiven, that sin still separates us from God, and that at our core, we still have a sinful nature. Here are some commonly held beliefs (with which we do not agree).²
 - “Walking in the light means living each day with God who is light. The nearer I come to God, the more conscious I shall be of my own sin and rebellion. So the greatest saints have always been conscious of themselves as the worst of sinners.”
 - “One further thought at the end of verse 7 is that as the light of God reveals our sin, we shall keep appropriating the cleansing that comes through Christ's death, by our own repentance and faith.”
 - “To walk in the light means to become increasingly conscious of sin that would hinder our fellowship with God and our fellow Christians, and as that sin is revealed, not to run away into the darkness again. Rather we bring it, by faith, to the God whose Son gave his life that all our sins might be forgiven and removed. As we do so, the barriers to fellowship are removed and we continue in that relationship with God.”
 - “One of God's projects in the life of every growing Christian is to peel back more and more layers of our hidden depravity and sinfulness (as we can bear it), so that we start to see ourselves as we really are, in God's sight. This project has the glorious end-purpose that we should become clean deep down.
 - “We shall carry our sinful nature with us every day until we die or Christ returns.”

² Taken from: Jackman, D. (1988). The message of John's letters: living in the love of God (p. 30). Leicester, England; Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

d. Then, what does it mean to “walk in the light”

- o Those who believe in Jesus walk in the light.

John 8:12

Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.”

- o Believers not only walk in the light, **WE ARE LIGHT. BECAUSE** we are light (not in order to be light), we **LIVE** as light. Light, rather than sharing in darkness, illuminates it.

Ephesians 5:8-12

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), ¹⁰ finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. ¹¹ And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret.

- o **Walking in the light is evidenced by our love for each other.**

1 John 2:9-11

He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. ¹⁰ He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. ¹¹ But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

John 13:34-35

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

- e. **Instead of seeing ourselves as in constant need of confession of sins, we should view ourselves the way He sees us under the New Covenant.**

Verses 8-10

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

8. Verses 8-9 are commonly misunderstood because the context is often put aside by commentators. John is testifying to non-believers. Thus, we must continue the audience. It is thought that John was dealing with pre-Gnostics who didn't believe they had sin or that anything they did was sin.

- a. Verse 8 is commonly used to “prove” that Christians have sin. Those who hold this view find it offensive for a Christian to claim anything written in Romans 6.

Romans 6

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? ² Certainly not!

Verse 2: How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?

Verse 6: Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with *Him*, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. ⁷ For he who has died has been freed from sin.

Verse 11: Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Verse 14: For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but

Verse 18: And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

Verse 22: But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life.

- b. Those who hold that John is speaking of Christians have some big hurdles to conquer for in the very same book in the next chapter, John clearly states that their sins had been forgiven for His name's sake. Thus, if your sins are forgiven and you have been cleansed of all unrighteousness, you have no sin.
- c. More logically, John means that if his audience, the non-believing Gnostics, who did not have fellowship with the Father or the Son—if they were to say they had no sin, they would be deceived, for “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God,” (Rom. 3:23).

9. Verse 9: However, if we (addressing those who are not in the light, who are not in fellowship; likely the Gnostics among them who believed they were without sin) confess our sins, He forgives us. Not only does He forgive us when we believe in Him, but **CLEANSSES** us of **ALL** unrighteousness.

- a. **Confess:** *hom-ol-og-eh'-o*, to assent, that is, *covenant, acknowledge*
- b. We are to acknowledge/agree that we have sinned. This is very different than the idea taught that we must list each sin before God **IN ORDER TO BE FORGIVEN**.
- c. We must not add in our minds “in that particular area of sin” to the phrase “cleanses us from all unrighteousness”, for this is not stated. When we acknowledge our need for forgiveness, we are also cleansed of all unrighteousness for all time. When we believe in Jesus, we are made the righteousness of God (Rom 5:1, 2 Cor. 5:21).
- d. If we (as non-Christians) confess/agree that we have sinned, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanses us for all time from all unrighteousness. In fact, we are made the very righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

CONFRONTING ERRORS OFTEN TAUGHT FROM 1 JOHN 1

1) The assumption with which many begin their study of 1 John 1 is that Christians are still sinners with sinful natures. Paul taught the complete opposite, that we are dead to, free from, and not under sins dominion.

Romans 6:6-7

Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; 7 for he who has died is freed from sin.

2) Paul NEVER told Christians to continually confess their sins in order to be forgiven. He declared that they were already forgiven.

Ephesians 1:7

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace

Colossians 1:14

In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

- 3) **Even John, who obviously wrote 1 John 1:9, when speaking to believers in the VERY NEXT CHAPTER declares that their sins were ALREADY forgiven.**
1 John 2:12
I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake.
- 4) **Later in the book of 1 John, John gives a very different "formula" for how we are to respond if we sin than that of confession.** Notice, that when believers sin, we don't need to "get" forgiveness. We are not to sin, but if we do, we have Jesus (more on this in chapter 2).
1 John 2:1
My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.
- 5) **It is not true that confession of sin is the way to become righteous or clean.** We are righteous by receiving His gift of righteousness, and this is received by faith.
2 Corinthians 5:21
He made Him who knew no sin to be a sin offering on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.
Romans 5:1-2
Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.
- 6) **Many emphasize "repentance and forsaking of sin" as a means of staying right with God.** However, as noted above, we are righteous by gift/grace through faith, and not through the process of repentance and forsaking sin. The glorious good news is that BECAUSE we are forgiven and right with God by grace through faith, WE DO NOT WANT TO SIN. We are changed into new beings who desire to please Him.
Romans 5:17
Much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.
- 7) **Jesus sacrifice was sufficient to give us no more sin consciousness.** If we are to constantly be confessing our sins in order to be forgiven, by clear definition we would NEED to constantly be aware of our sin.
Hebrews 10:2
Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?
- 8) **Under the Old Covenant a person had to forgive IN ORDER to be forgiven. In the New Covenant we forgive because we are forgiven.**
Mark 11:25
Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.
Ephesians 4:32
Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.
- 9) **It is not true that when we sin we "break fellowship with God".** Our sin cannot possibly break our fellowship with God because we are one with Him, and He has promised to never leave us or forsake us (no, not ever). **It is not true that confession of sin "restores" fellowship with God because we are never separated from God because we are one spirit with Him.**

Hebrews 13:5 AMP

For He has said, "I will never [under any circumstances] desert you [nor give you up nor leave you without support, nor will I in any degree leave you helpless], nor will I forsake or let you down or relax My hold on you [assuredly not]!"

1 Corinthians 6:17

But the one who is united and joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.

*Since God forgave the sins of the whole world, the only people who need to confess their sins in order to be forgiven are the people (Gnostics) who don't believe they have any sin. Since Jesus came to save us from our sins, **if someone (a Gnostic) thinks he has no sin, he has no need of a Savior.** Therefore, for the Gnostic to be saved he must confess his sins (agree with God that he has need of forgiveness). Most non-Christians do not need to confess their sins in order to be forgiven. The only thing they need to do is to **believe in Jesus** (Romans 10:9-10, Acts 16:31, Acts 8:35-37, Eph. 2:8-10, Acts 15:9)).*

Romans 10:9-10

If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; 10 for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

10. Verse 10: Anyone with the audacity to claim that he has never sinned, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. This person is not a Christian. This verse, however, is commonly used to "prove" that Christians are still sinners. It is assumed they will sin. If they say they don't struggle with sin, it is assumed (falsely), that they are lying.

Romans 3:10-25

"THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;

¹¹ THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS,

THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;

¹² ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS;

THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD,

THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE."

¹³ "THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE,

WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING,"

"THE POISON OF ASPES IS UNDER THEIR LIPS";

¹⁴ "WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS";

¹⁵ "THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,

¹⁶ DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,

¹⁷ AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN."

¹⁸ "THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES."

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God;

²⁰ because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. 21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; ²⁵ whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.

Appendix to Lesson One

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From Are We Preaching “Another” Gospel?

By C. D. Hildebrand

Day 8

WHAT ABOUT 1 JOHN 1:9?

Every Bible teacher understands how easy it is to misinterpret Scripture by lifting one verse out of its context and developing a doctrine around it. Most work diligently toward not being guilty of doing this when we prepare a teaching.

Yet, the church *has* done this with 1 John 1:9. It has become the core of our understanding of how it is we are forgiven of sin now that we are believers. We make many conclusions based on this *one* verse setting aside the clear evidence within 1 John and in the whole of the New Testament Scripture that we are forever and continually cleansed by the one-time sacrifice of the blood of Jesus. We don't need to *seek* forgiveness. We are already forgiven. Let's look at this again.

Hebrews 10:11-14 NASB

*Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never **take away** sins; ¹² but He, having offered **one** sacrifice for sins for **all time**, sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. ¹⁴ For by **one offering** He has **perfected for all time** those who are sanctified.*

Animal sacrifices offered by fallible priests were unable to “take away” sin, and they could not make the worshippers holy. That's why forgiveness under the law had to be obtained again and again. When Jesus atoned for sin, however, He atoned *one* time for *all* sin, taking away our sins—forever making us perfect in regard to sin. There is no other sacrifice for sin. We can do nothing to obtain forgiveness. It is already ours.

However, we ignore this information when reading 1 John 1:9. The first false assumption made is that while Jesus provided forgiveness through His blood, this forgiveness is not automatic, but must be *obtained*. The second notion is the formula itself: that if we sin, we *must* confess our sins *in order* to be forgiven and cleansed of that particular sin. Then come the conclusions based on these false assumptions: that if we *don't* confess our sins, we are *not* forgiven and that if we are not forgiven, we are obviously not right with God until we confess our sins; many adding that in this state we could end up in hell!

However, as my husband often points out, 1 John 1:9 must itself be interpreted by Scripture and not Scripture by 1 John 1:9.

For many years I resisted what I am about to write and with good reason. 1 John 1:9 was a sacred practice for me most of my life. I'd been taught that when I sinned, I could go to the Father and confess my sins and be not only forgiven but cleansed of all unrighteousness (in that area, I would add in my mind). In my thinking, this was a freedom I enjoyed as a believer in Jesus Christ. I could go *directly* to God and ask for forgiveness unlike *other* religions that taught one had to go to a spiritual leader in order to obtain forgiveness. I had *direct* access for forgiveness. I practiced 1 John 1:9 so many times, that I cherished this formula. It “worked” for me, so it had to be true, I thought. I found comfort in *doing* something to gain forgiveness. I saw it as *my* part in the equation. In my mind I was truly trusting in the blood of Jesus to forgive me. I didn't think that confession alone provided forgiveness. I didn't believe for one moment that I was doing any more than obeying the method I had been taught. I didn't understand, because no one ever taught me, that **I was already forgiven and that this continual confession, even with the understanding that only by His blood could I be forgiven, was not necessary.**

What I could not see because I was blinded by the tradition I held, was that the first chapter of 1 John was written primarily as a testimony to *non-believers*. I fought this idea because 1 John 1:9 was

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my personal holy tradition passed down to me from all those who taught me. How could so many people be wrong? Now before going into automatic convulsions about the topic as I used to do, please hear me out.

One evening as I sat in my office I opened my Bible and, as we'd done with so many treasured topics over the years since we woke up to His grace, bowed my head and said, "Lord, I just don't get what people are saying about 1 John 1:9. If I am missing something, please show me personally." What happened next surprised me and shook me to the core! I honestly did not expect to see *anything* I had not seen previously, but there it was in plain sight. John was *witnessing* to sinners not instructing believers. Formerly, I had only been able to conclude that "we" and "us" were used to include the intended audience which I thought to be Christian. Suddenly I saw that "we" and "us" were the ones testifying to "you", those who did not yet believe.

1 John 1:1-8³

*That which was from the beginning (attesting to His deity), which we⁴ have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and **our hands have handled**, (affirming that John personally could testify that Jesus, prior to and after His resurrection, had a body and was not a spirit being) concerning the Word of life—² the life was manifested, and we (those who walked with Him personally) have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you (to those of you who don't know or who still doubt) that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us (those who believe)—³ that which we (those who believe) have seen and heard (Jesus) we declare to you, (John is preaching the gospel to the lost) **that you also may have fellowship with us**; (those whom John is addressing this chapter did NOT have fellowship with them yet because they were not yet born again) and truly our fellowship (speaking of himself and those who were also believers with him) is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (attesting that he and those with him were believers).⁴ And these things we write to you that your joy may be full. (Our joy is full. We know the Savior. We want you to know Him so you may have the same joy.)*

Suddenly, I saw it clearly: John is addressing non-believers⁵ in Chapter One, but let us continue.

⁵ *This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you (those of you who do not know the message), that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all (John is attesting to God's perfect character and holiness).⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with Him (if we say we are born again), and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth (those to whom he was speaking were walking in darkness—not saved. If someone claims to be a Christian, and is walking in darkness, that person is a liar.)⁷ But if we walk in the light as He is in the light (if we are Christians), we have fellowship with one another (only believers have fellowship with each other), and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses (is cleansing) us (believers) from all (ALL) sin.⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (he is implying that some among them, the **unbelievers** whom he is addressing, were saying they had no sin).*

We know and trust that faith in the real Jesus is essential to salvation. Some have written that John is addressing *believers* who did not believe Jesus came as a human being, and yet he goes on to

³ As with all quotations from the NKJV, comments within parenthesis not found in the original text are added for clarification.

⁴ "We" refers to those who heard and saw and touched Jesus.

⁵ It is important to note that John does not address *believers* until chapter two unlike 2nd and 3rd John where he immediately identifies his audience as believers.

say later in his letter that if we do not believe that Jesus came in the flesh we are not saved. So, anyone holding this view could not be a believer.

1 John 4:1-3

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

We also know from verse eight that the people John is addressing are not believers because the truth is not in them. It reads, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” If the truth is not in someone, that person is not a believer.

Then we read verse nine, the solution to *unredeemed* man who does not think he has sin. “If you confess your sins,” that is to say, if you “agree with God” that you have sin, “He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness.” This describes initial salvation perfectly. We are forgiven of sin and cleansed of *all* unrighteousness, so much so that we are made the very righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

While belief in and confession of the risen Jesus as the Lord is what is essential to salvation, it is clear to all that redemption/salvation includes forgiveness of sin. John’s audience denied their need for forgiveness, even that they had sin. What I’m saying is that even though confessing sins formally is not a *prerequisite* for salvation (Rom. 10:9-10); the awareness that we need and receive forgiveness is certainly present since Jesus died to save us from our sins.

Since I understood this truth, I’ve read substantiating arguments about this from writers more eloquent and detailed than I, but in my opinion the strongest argument goes back to basic hermeneutic principles. **We must not use one verse to form a doctrine, but must allow the verse to be interpreted by its context and the whole of Scripture.**

So, let us consider the following very important information about the historical context. John wrote 1 John around 90 AD, long after Paul died; obviously after all of his letters were written; letters which form our understanding of the gospel. **It is of weighty significance to note that while Paul did correct believers about their behavior, he never once expressed in any of his letters that a believer needed to confess his sins in order to be forgiven.** Instead, he always affirmed that our sins are already forgiven—all of them. If it is essential for us to confess our sins *in order* to be forgiven and cleansed, then why did Paul not include this crucial information in at least one of his letters (if not in all of them)?

How irresponsible it would have been for Paul to not mention such a crucial formula! By not doing so, he would have condemned all of his followers to having thousands of sins that were not “put under the blood”. Surely, he would have brought it up in Romans 6, that great chapter about our freedom from sin. Why didn’t he say, “You are free from sin, and you can get further forgiveness when you confess your sins”? Shouldn’t he have expressed the formula of confession leading to forgiveness and cleansing to the erring Corinthians? He didn’t discuss it because he didn’t believe it to be necessary. Paul spoke of sin as something that is *already* forgiven.

Ephesians 1:7

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.

Colossians 2:13-14

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you ALL trespasses, ¹⁴ having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

Paul reasons with his readers to walk worthy of what they had already been given. He reminds them that since they are forgiven of *all* trespasses and are seated with Christ, to set their minds on heavenly things not earthly. Because they already died, were hidden in Christ, and raised with Him, they should not sin. When Christ appeared, they would appear with Him in glory because of what Jesus did. Paul never taught that believers needed to confess every sin to get forgiveness because he viewed believers as already forgiven.

Ephesians 4:1

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.

Colossians 3:1-4

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. ² Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. ³ For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

Then there is the proof within John's first letter. When he clearly is addressing the believers in chapter two, he affirms that they are already forgiven.

1 John 2:12

I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake.

Then, later in his letter, he has something very different to say about a believer who sins than what we assume he is saying in 1 John 1:9. There is no formula, only a statement of fact.

1 John 2:1

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

This is very important to notice. John *does not say*, "If anyone sins, simply confess your sin and you will be forgiven and cleansed." He says to the *believer*, "If you sin, you have an Advocate." Our Advocate's blood is cleansing us continually from ALL sin. Read it one more time.

1 John 1:7

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses (is cleansing) us from all sin.

We have been forgiven for *all* sin. If we sin we are cleansed, not because we confess to get forgiveness, but because our Advocate, Jesus Christ, already paid the penalty for all of our sins, which at the time He died were all in the future. His blood reached across our entire lifetime and across all of history. That's how complete His sacrifice was.

Now, some will agree that according to 1 John 1:7 His blood continually cleanses us from all sin, but then insist that 1 John 1:9 teaches us that we need to seek "relational" forgiveness with God (which in no way is indicated by the context of that chapter). This comes from the conclusion based on false assumptions that I mentioned previously—the false belief that when we sin, our relationship with God is somehow strained, and for this reason, we must confess our sins in order for our relationship with God to be "restored". This idea cannot be substantiated based on the fact that "our sins and our lawless deeds He remembers no more". Our relationship with God is never in jeopardy.

Now of course, when we offend someone, we apologize. There is nothing wrong with expressing our regret to God for something we have thought or said or done; but not *in order* to be forgiven,

and certainly not *because* our relationship with Him needs mending. God does not sit offended and brooding when we sin. On the contrary, when we sin, His grace and compassion and love superabound to us, and He begins to work all things together for our good—yes, even our mistakes!

Some of us, even understanding that we are perfectly forgiven forever, might hesitate to teach this glorious truth because we fear that the flock will run off and go on a sinning binge. Yet, this good news does not promote freedom *to* sin, rather, freedom *from* sin, so that the *opposite* of what we fear, occurs in the heart of someone who truly understands His grace. When we realize that we are *forever* forgiven of *all* sin, we do not desire to sin, instead, our hearts rise up in worship!

If you doubt that teaching perfect forever forgiveness will result in less sin than more sin, reflect on the scene of the sinful woman who washed Jesus feet with her tears and dried them with her hair in the house of Simon (Lk. 7:36-50). He was disgusted that Jesus would allow such a sinner to touch Him. So, knowing his thoughts, Jesus told him a parable about two men, one who owed much and one who owed little who were both forgiven for every debt when they were unable to pay. Jesus then asked Simon, “Who do you think loved him more?” Simon correctly answered, “The one who was forgiven more.”

Can you hear this? This woman, who was a sinner, was clearly the person who owed “much”. Jesus knew that this woman was not going to go out that door and continue in her sin because she had a clean slate to fill again with sin. The joy of knowing she was forgiven completely would cause her to love Jesus all the more and cause her to forsake sin and this person was not even born again.

When we, those who are born again, understand how greatly and completely we are forgiven, it doesn’t cause us to love less, but more! It doesn’t cause us to sin more, but rather to forsake sin.

Oh, the joy of peace with God; the clear understanding that nothing, not even sin can separate us from our Father’s love!