

Chapter 1

1 John 1

Walking in the Light

Overview

Chapter 1 of John's epistle is rich with truth that can easily be overlooked. Many readers sometimes skim the introductions of New Testament letters, assuming the language is repetitive or merely formal. Yet these openings often provide a glimpse into the heart of the author. The way they speak of our Lord and address their audience reveals their intentions and priorities. While much of the New Testament letters contain warnings and strong rebukes, the introductions demonstrate that such firmness is never for condemnation but for guidance and care. John's letter exemplifies this principle. His deliberate choices in language—how he refers to Jesus and how he addresses his readers—reflect both pastoral wisdom and theological precision. Although the letter's ultimate purpose is stated most clearly in chapter 5, understanding that John writes “that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13) helps frame the direct yet reflective tone established from the very opening lines.

As we move through this letter, it is crucial to keep John's heart and intent in mind. Too often, readers approach Scripture by isolating verses from their context, pulling passages like puzzle pieces to prove a doctrinal point. This approach can easily distort the original meaning and even change the author's intention. In many Christian circles, this is precisely what happens—verses are exchanged in debates without regard

for the broader message or pastoral purpose behind them. By keeping John's purpose at the forefront, we are able to read his letter not with fear or guilt, but with understanding, comfort, and encouragement. His words are meant to guide us into truth, strengthen our faith, and draw us closer to the life-giving fellowship of God.

1 John 1:1–4 (ESV)

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, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us, and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

John's opening lines immediately establish his credibility as a trustworthy witness. He is not passing along secondhand reports or speculative ideas, but speaking with authority as one who personally encountered the living Christ. By using repeated sensory language—"we have heard," "we have seen," "we looked upon," "have touched"—John emphasizes the physical and tangible reality of the incarnation.¹ The Word of Life was not an abstract concept or philosophical notion, but a real person, with whom the apostles had direct lived interaction. Their testimony

1. **Incarnation.** Literally "in flesh"; the doctrine that in Jesus of Nazareth God took on human flesh and became the divine God-man. Grant R. Osborne, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1025.

carries weight because it is grounded in firsthand experience. They are not preserving stories for tradition's sake, but proclaiming historical truth, rooted in events they personally witnessed.

John concludes this introduction with a profound pastoral hope: "so that you too may fellowship with us." His desire is not merely to recount events, but to draw readers into a shared experience of the life of Christ. This fellowship extends beyond human companions to include both the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, establishing from the outset that Christian life is rooted in relationship with God. John emphasizes the personal and relational nature of faith without delving yet into the deeper dynamics between Father and Son, reserving that fuller treatment for later in the letter.

The Father and the Son – The Lord Jesus Christ declares in His high priestly prayer, "*And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*" (John 17:3,ESV). From the very beginning of the New Testament, believers are called into fellowship with **the Father through His Son**. This is not incidental language, nor is it a theological afterthought. It is the consistent pattern of apostolic proclamation. Salvation, life, and fellowship are always presented as coming from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit.

John will later expound on this reality in greater depth, especially when he makes clear that one cannot have the Father without the Son, nor the Son without the Father. That fuller treatment belongs where John himself places it, later in the letter, and I will address it there. For now, the purpose is not to explore the depth of Trinitarian relationships, but to establish something foundational that must be held from the outset.

Throughout the New Testament, and especially in the introductions of its letters, the Father and the Son are always **distinctly and deliberately identified**. They are never merged,

confused, or treated as interchangeable persons. The apostles do not speak of a vague divine figure who appears now as Father and now as Son, nor do they allow the reader to collapse the Son into the Father or the Father into the Son. While God is one in essence, He is never presented as one in person. The unity of God does not erase distinction, and distinction does not threaten unity.

This pattern is not accidental. It guards the believer from false conceptions of God and anchors the faith in the God who has revealed Himself as He truly is. From the opening lines of Scripture to the final blessings of the epistles, the Father and the Son stand together, distinct yet inseparable, each acting in perfect harmony in the work of redemption. John begins his letter within this same apostolic framework, grounding the reader immediately in the truth that Christian fellowship is always with both the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, never one to the exclusion of the other.

Historical Background: Docetism

John's primary aim in this letter is to provide assurance of salvation. Alongside this pastoral concern, however, is a secondary purpose, to confront a growing heresy within the early church. This broader heretical movement is commonly referred to as Gnosticism,² a category that included several related errors.

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2. **Gnosticism** refers to a broad set of early religious movements that emphasized secret or special knowledge (*gnōsis*) as the means of salvation. Gnostic systems typically viewed the material world as evil or inferior and elevated the spiritual realm as good, often leading to the denial of the true incarnation of Christ.

Historical Background: Docetism (cont.)

More specifically, John is addressing the teaching of Docetism, derived from the Greek word *dokein*, meaning “to seem” or “to appear.” Rooted in Gnostic thought, Docetism taught that all flesh is inherently evil while spirit alone is good. If this premise were true, then Christ could not have truly come in the flesh. Jesus, according to this teaching, only appeared to be human, but was not genuinely incarnate. Such a belief denies the incarnation itself, the truth that “the Word became flesh,” and rejects what would later be defined in church history as the hypostatic union³, the doctrine that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. This heresy was actively spreading during the time of John’s writing, and it explains why John places such heavy emphasis on the physical reality of Christ’s humanity, both in his Gospel and in this epistle.

With this in mind, John’s opening words take on sharper focus. He is not merely offering poetic testimony or establishing apostolic authority, but deliberately confronting claims that threatened the heart of the gospel. By emphasizing that Christ was heard, seen, looked upon, and physically touched, John draws an unmistakable line in the sand. The Jesus proclaimed by the apostles was no phantom, no divine appearance cloaked in illusion, but one who truly took on flesh.

3. Hypostatic Union. The union of the divine and human natures in the one person of Christ, without change, mixture, or confusion, each nature retaining its own properties. Richard Watson, *A Biblical and Theological Dictionary*, s.v. “Hypostatical Union.”

This insistence is not incidental. It is pastoral and corrective. John frames his language to leave no room for a Christ who only seemed human, or whose physical life could be dismissed as unnecessary or corrupt. Every sensory detail reinforces the reality of the incarnation and directly undermines the core claims of Docetism. While these truths remain essential for the church in every age, recognizing the heresy John is addressing helps us understand why he speaks with such precision and repetition at the outset of this letter.

While John ensures the reader that Jesus truly came in the flesh and walked among us, he consistently uses his language to present both the tangible Christ and the infinite Lord. He affirms not only that Jesus was physically present, but that the One who was seen, heard, and touched is also eternal. John's reference to "the beginning" is therefore a deliberate affirmation of the eternal nature of Christ. This language echoes the opening of John's Gospel (John 1:1–14), where the Word is described as preexistent, with God, and as God. Jesus, the Word of Life, did not come into existence at some point in history. He existed eternally with the Father. This establishes that the incarnate Christ was present at creation itself and later entered time and space according to God's eternal plan.

The phrase "eternal life" is central to John's theology. It is not merely a future hope or an abstract concept, but a present reality that was "made manifest" in Jesus Christ. Eternal life is not simply about what happens after death, but about knowing God now through His Son. For this reason, John writes not only to defend the truth of the gospel, but to invite others into the same fellowship with God that the apostles themselves enjoy.

John's proclamation, then, is neither self-centered nor academic. His desire is that his readers would enter into fellowship with him and with the other apostles. This fellowship is not merely agreement in doctrine, but a living relationship with the

Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. Fellowship with God stands at the very heart of the Christian faith. John writes so that others may share in this fellowship and, as a result, share in the fullness of joy that flows from it.

He closes this opening section by revealing the ultimate aim of his writing: joy. The gospel is not presented as a burden or merely a moral system, but as the source of deep and abiding joy. This joy is rooted in reconciliation with God and participation in His life. The apostles' joy is made complete when others come to share in the life they themselves have received in Christ.

The Word of Life

John opens this epistle much as he opens his Gospel, anchoring his message in the preeminence and eternality of Christ. In the Gospel, he declares, “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1). In both writings, Jesus is identified as the *Logos* (λόγος)—not merely a spoken word, but the eternal, self-expressing Word. This distinction is significant. In Matthew 4:4, when Jesus speaks of living by “every word that comes from the mouth of God,” the Greek term used is *rhema* (ῥῆμα), referring to a spoken utterance. By contrast, John employs *Logos* to convey the dynamic, creative, and divine self-expression of God made manifest in Christ.

To the Greek world, *Logos* signified the rational principle that orders the cosmos, providing unity, coherence, and meaning to all that exists.⁴ It was understood as the underlying reason that gives structure to the universe, a concept developed in Stoic philosophy as *logos spermatikos*, the seminal Word that shapes and informs all matter. To the Jewish mind, by contrast, the

4. **Logos:** J. N. Birdsall, “Logos,” *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., 693.

Word of God was inherently creative and powerful, the divine instrument through which God brought all things into being. John draws upon both of these frameworks to communicate a profound truth: this eternal, divine *Logos* did not remain abstract but became incarnate, dwelling among humanity in the person of Jesus Christ.

Even John's grammar reflects careful theological intent.⁵ He begins with the phrase "that which," employing neuter language before transitioning to masculine terms. This stylistic movement mirrors a deliberate theological progression, from the abstract proclamation of the *Logos* to the full personal revelation of Jesus Christ. The language echoes Genesis 1:1, and in John 1:1, the verb choice is especially significant. John uses *ēn* ("was") rather than *egeneto* ("came into being"), emphasizing that Christ eternally existed, while all created things came into existence through Him (John 1:3).

John is insistent that this message is not mythological or symbolic. He and the other apostles heard Christ, saw Him, and touched Him. His appeal is grounded in eyewitness testimony. He is stating plainly that this message is rooted in lived, historical reality.

Why is this so important? John is not claiming merely to believe in a man named Jesus who claimed to be divine. He is confessing that he personally **saw and touched the risen Christ** and bore witness to His resurrected life. This is not second-hand belief or theological speculation, but eyewitness testimony. Critics of Christianity often assert that the apostles

5. James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1998; revised edition, Baker Publishing Group, 2019), chap. 4, "A Masterpiece: The Prologue of John."

fabricated their accounts, yet such claims are difficult to sustain. The apostles were not confessing belief in a myth, but testifying to having seen Jesus alive after His crucifixion. It was this claim—that Christ had risen and that they had seen Him—that provoked opposition, persecution, and ultimately their deaths. (*Acts 4:19–20; 2 Peter 1:16*)

It is possible for people to die for beliefs they think are true. It is far less likely for many individuals to willingly endure suffering and death for what they know to be a lie. The apostles were not persuaded merely by words or ideas. What provoked opposition was their insistence that Jesus had risen bodily from the grave. Early Roman writers, such as Pliny the Younger, writing around AD 112 to Emperor Trajan, noted that some Christians—men and women alike—refused to abandon what he called this “superstition,” singing hymns to Christ as God even when arrested and threatened with punishment.⁶ The resurrection was the truth authorities sought to suppress.

This single fact stands at the center of the Christian faith. The resurrection confirms everything Jesus said and did. It validates His identity and disarms death itself, the greatest weapon of the enemy. As Paul states, if Christ has not been raised, then our faith is in vain. (*1 Corinthians 15:14*) For this reason, the apostles’ confession that they saw the risen Christ, bearing the marks of crucifixion, is of immense importance. They did not die for an idea they found convincing. They endured suffering and death because they encountered the risen Lord.

1 John 1:5-10 (ESV)

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 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. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

John moves from his introduction about the eternal nature of Christ to a practical application for the Christian life, grounding his message in the truth that God is light. The statement, “God is light,” conveys more than God’s moral purity; it communicates the very nature of His revelation. Light represents truth, holiness, and purity—all inherent in God’s character. Darkness, in contrast, represents sin, deception, and the absence of God. Understanding this contrast is foundational for grasping what it means to live as a believer.

John calls out the inconsistency of claiming fellowship with God while living in darkness. True fellowship with God requires walking in His light—a life characterized by integrity, righteousness, and transparency. If we live in sin yet claim to be in fellowship with God, we are deceiving ourselves. Fellowship is not merely intellectual assent to truth but a tangible, lived experience of God’s light in our daily conduct.

John emphasizes the necessity of acknowledging sin. Denial of sin leads to self-deception and undermines the truth of God’s Word. Confession is not merely the acknowledgment of individual wrongs but a recognition of our overall sinfulness and

alignment with God's understanding of human nature. As he writes, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (1 John 1:8, ESV). Confession positions the believer to receive God's forgiveness and cleansing—a thorough and complete work that restores fellowship with Him.

The promise of forgiveness is central to this passage. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9, ESV). This forgiveness is not earned by merit but flows from God's character: His justice ensures that sin is addressed, and His faithfulness ensures that grace is applied. Through the blood of Jesus, believers are restored to fellowship with God, renewed in spirit, and empowered to walk in His light.

Finally, John addresses the absurdity of claiming never to have sinned. This not only insults the truth of God's Word but also contradicts the foundational message of the gospel: all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23, ESV). The Christian life requires ongoing repentance, confession, and transformation. To deny this is to place oneself in opposition to God's revealed truth.

The Comparison of Two Types of Men

Here in the first chapter of his letter, John sets up a comparison between two kinds of people within the visible church—the gathered community of professing believers, which includes both true believers and those who merely appear to believe. From the outset, it is important to see that John is drawing categorical lines: the true believer and the liar. As the letter continues, he will develop this contrast repeatedly, and if we do not grasp the framework he establishes here, it becomes easy to treat isolated verses as if John is giving requirements for salvation rather than describing its fruits. Do not fall into the error of turning what John presents as the product of salvation in Christ into the prerequisite for salvation in Christ.

John contrasts the one who claims fellowship with God yet walks in darkness with the one who walks in the light. Similarly, he contrasts those who confess their sin with those who deny it. Many readers struggle with this distinction and ask questions such as, “Does this mean we must confess every sin to be forgiven? If someone dies without confessing a sin, are they condemned?” These questions often arise from isolating a single verse. To understand John’s point, we must recognize the kind of contrast he is making. He is not setting a requirement to confess each individual sin; rather, he is highlighting the believer’s recognition of dependence on God. As James 1:23–25 illustrates, looking into the perfect law of liberty is like gazing into a mirror: the one who truly sees himself acknowledges his condition and responds in obedience. John’s purpose, then, is not to provide a checklist for salvation, but to distinguish those who humbly recognize their need for God from those who refuse to acknowledge their guilt at all.

The Contrast of Light and Darkness: The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”(Luke 18:9-14, ESV)

Jesus addresses those who trust in themselves, relying on their own works for righteousness. They fail to recognize their sin and, in doing so, look down on others as inferior. As Isaiah declares, “*We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment*” (Isaiah 64:6, ESV). The Pharisee exemplifies this attitude: he boldly stands in the presence of God, thanking Him for not being like “other men” and judging the tax collector. By contrast, the tax collector recognizes his sin and unworthiness, humbling himself before God with a plea for mercy. Jesus concludes that the humble are exalted, and the self-exalting are humbled.

The core flaw Jesus addresses is **self-deception and minimization of sin**, which leads to pride, judgment of others, and separation from God. Recognizing our sin and humbling ourselves before the Lord is essential for true fellowship with Him.

This comparison between the true believer and the false believer is not a new concept revealed in John's teaching. It is present throughout the teachings of our Lord. I referenced the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector because it is one of my favorites, but this principle appears from the opening of the Gospels to the very end. From the beginning, when John the Baptist is preparing the way for Christ, he declares that the winnowing fork is ready and that the wheat will be separated from the weeds (Matthew 3:12). Many of Jesus's parables distinguish those of true faith from those of false faith, and at the conclusion of His three-year ministry, in the Olivet Discourse, Jesus describes the final separation of the goats from the sheep (Matthew 25:31–46). John is not presenting a new revelation here; he is echoing this teaching at the close of 1 John 1. The believer who denies sin lifts themselves up and separates from the light, while the one who confesses and humbles themselves is forgiven and restored. This is not a prescription for salvation but a pastoral challenge: evaluate your own heart. Do you recognize your sin and need for a Savior, or do you claim the light while remaining in darkness, blind to your own spiritual condition? True fellowship with God begins with honest self-examination and the recognition of His holiness.

As we conclude chapter 1, there is one final point to notice. John's opening chapter highlights two essential realities for those who have fellowship with God: who you say Jesus is, and who you say you are. We acknowledge who He is—the eternal Son of God, who came in the flesh, our Savior, the Word of Life—and we acknowledge who we are—a sinner in need of His grace and mercy.

This is the message at the heart of the Gospel: the bad news is who we are and what we've done, but the good news is who He is and what He's done. No one can come to Christ without acknowledging both.