

Intro

Welcome to this series in the first letter of John.

I'm not going to say too much about the background to the letter today but I hope you'll explore that at home or in your Growth Groups.

I'll just say that it's a letter written by John the apostle, the brother of James, the writer of John's Gospel and Revelation, and that he wrote it in Ephesus about 50 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus — probably as a circular letter to be read in a number of churches.

In the last chapter of this letter John lets us in on his purpose in writing the letter when he says:

“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” (1 John 5:13 NIV11)

So, his purpose is to give us a few sign posts that we can look at to check that we're on the right track... to have assurance that we have eternal life.

When I'm driving anywhere I always feel reassured whenever I see a sign post that says I'm getting closer to where I think I'm trying to go.

It's when those signposts disappear that I start to wonder if I've missed a turn off or something.

John was writing to Christians who'd possibly been left wondering if they were on the right track after some of their members had split from them and begun teaching new things about Christian belief and life.

So he gives them these 'tests' — not as a hurdle to jump over but as a way of checking to be sure they are on the right track.

These tests are just as important today as they were then.

There are no shortage of ideas and teachings about Christianity... about what we believe and about how we ought to be living... TV programs, etc... that will sound good to us and influence the way we think and act.

But even without being lead astray by unhelpful ideas, I think we can just as easily drift subconsciously into an understanding of Christianity that fits the way we live, especially in regards to obedience and love, which are two of the things that John concentrates on in his letters.

As my time here comes to an end, I want to be able to leave knowing that we're all on the right track... because I want all of us to end up in the same place when our lives here come to an end.

I want us all to be together with God the Father and with Jesus, sharing eternal life.

So let's listen carefully to John together, and pay attention to the sign posts he's pointing out to test and check that we are on the right track together.

Fellowship with the Light (1-4)

In the introduction in v1-4 John gives us one of the first signs of whether we're on the right track or not.

In the first chapter of his Gospel John introduces Jesus as the Word, who was God and who was with God in the beginning.

And in John 1:4 he says that life is in Jesus, and that *that* life was the light of all mankind.

In John 14:6 Jesus claims to be the the way, the truth and the life... the only way to know God the Father.

In these first 4 verses of this letter, John's echoing what he wrote about Jesus in his Gospel... he's the eternal Word of life who embodies eternal life.

And this word of life is the real, human and divine man, Jesus Christ.

John and the other apostles can testify to the fact that, in Jesus, there is eternal life because they saw, heard and touched him both before and after he was raised from death.

This physical, eternal human being is the same person John describes in the opening of his Gospel and here at the beginning of this letter as the Word.

He's the Word of life.

And what John is saying here is that eternal life can only be found in accepting that the incarnate, risen Jesus is the source of that life.

Here's the first and most basic touchstone of Christian faith.

And what it means for us is, firstly, that it's not open to us to have our own opinion about who Jesus is.

Not only was Jesus a real historical person — no historian worth his salt would argue with that.

But this man is the eternal Word of God who took on human flesh and became a man.

And he was raised a real man.

He wasn't raised in some metaphorical sense.

When I was a young Christian I was astounded to hear the then Archbishop of Perth, Peter Carnley, denying that Jesus physically rose from death.

It's not a matter of opinion that we're free to differ over.

The old Athanasian Creed (which we don't use very often) affirms that Jesus rose bodily from the dead, and it concludes by saying:

This is the catholic (universal) faith:

one cannot be saved without believing it firmly and faithfully.

And that's what John's saying here.

Eternal life for us depends on whether we believe Jesus — fully God and fully man — really lived, really died, and really rose from the dead.

That's what John and the other apostles proclaim about him.

As we believe their word about the eternal Word, we have fellowship with them.

Fellowship is a word that means a close partnership of people with something important in common.

Through believing the word of the apostles about Jesus, we're in partnership with them.

And our partnership with them brings us by God's grace into fellowship with God the Father and with Jesus Christ.

In John 17 as Jesus prayed for his followers he said:

"Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (John 17:3 NIV11)

If you believe in Jesus Christ, as the apostles who saw, heard and touched him as a man both before he died and after he was raised, proclaimed him, you've just passed a sign post reassuring you that you're on the right track.

Praise God!

Walking In The Light (5-7)

But it's not just about what you say you believe.

Belief isn't just something that goes on in your head.

If we say we believe something, that belief must affect the way we live.

If we believe that eternal life comes through believing in Jesus as he's been proclaimed to us by the apostles, that belief has implications for us.

It means that the eternal life that the apostles saw, heard and touched in Jesus is what we have to look forward to — that is, a real but new physical existence beyond death.

In John's day people had split from the church that had been established on the apostles' eyewitness testimony.

Some taught that Jesus only seemed to be human, and others that his divine nature was separated from the human one when he was on the cross.

And those distorted beliefs lead to distorted ideas about living as a Christian in the world.

If Jesus' human body was discarded as he went to the cross, and wasn't raised, then we'll be separated from our human-ness when we die.

The bottom line of that way of thinking is that it gives us a license to justify sin...

...because sin is part of our human-ness, and that human-ness will cease to exist after we die.

So we don't need to worry about sin in our lives now.

In verses 5-7 John talks about the Christian life as a walk.

For most people these days we only go for a walk for exercise. So most of the time we'll end up back where we started — at home!

But the Christian walk is one where we expect to make progress — to be going somewhere.

In v5-7 John shows us a second sign post.

He says if we claim to have that fellowship with the Father and with Jesus, we won't walk in darkness.

And the reason in v5 is because there is no darkness in God.

John uses light and darkness to show how utterly different God and this sinful world are.

God is utterly pure and holy.

Sin is utterly repulsive to him.

There can be no fellowship between him and sinful humanity.

Just like light can have nothing to do with darkness.

If I get up for a glass of water in the night and turn the light on, there's no battle between the light and darkness to see who wins.

Light destroys darkness.

If we claim to have close fellowship with God, then his purity drives sin out of our lives.

So walking in the light means living a life where sin has been driven out by the light of God in Christ.

To put it more bluntly, if we say we believe in Jesus, we won't continue to sin.

John's been accused of preaching sinless perfection here, which he isn't.

But we too easily dismiss altogether what he's getting at.

And when we do that we're really just giving ourselves a way to justify staying where we are, and not progressing on the Christian walk.

I wonder if you've ever found yourself justifying being angry and unloving towards someone because that's just the way you are.

You're not willing to work on changing the way you treat other people in the light of the way God has treated you in Christ.

Where God has treated us with mercy, forgiveness and grace and lovingly welcomed us into the closest of fellowship with him, you want to stay angry and judgmental and keep people at a distance.

Look at the sign post.

If you have fellowship with God, that darkness has no place.

The blood of Jesus has purified you from all sin.

You must not continue to walk in the darkness of sin.

You cannot justify continuing to live as if Jesus' death and resurrection make no difference here and now to how you live and how you love others.

Jesus' death on the cross purifies us from all sin.

He has brought us into the light where darkness has to be driven out.

What Jesus has done for us doesn't give us a license to keep being the person we used to be... or even justifying other sinful, unloving behaviour that we've become comfortable with.

Fellowship with the risen Lord Jesus means the darkness of sin flees in the presence of his light in our lives.

There's sign post 2.

Sin Exposed (8-10)

Have you ever felt like an imposter?

It's one of the feelings I sometimes struggle with with depression.

You feel like you're trying to put on this outward persona that doesn't fit with the way you're feeling on the inside.

In v8 John puts up the third sign post we'll look at today.

If we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

Doesn't that seem to contradict what he's just written in vv5-7?

Or is this the excuse card to let us off the hook because we know we're not sinless?

I want to suggest it's neither.

To walk in the light doesn't mean to put on a facade and pretend to be something you're not.

That's religious hypocrisy, and it doesn't fool anyone but yourself.

Inside that imposter is a human nature still infected by sin.

If we believe in Jesus that sinful nature has been pushed off its throne and doesn't rule our life anymore.

But it's still there infecting the core of our being and often pushing its influence out in our words and actions.

The imposter will hide behind his facade pretending that he's not like that.

But John's final sign post here says that those who have fellowship with God — who are walking in the light — won't try to hide or justify the wrongness of the way we've spoken or acted.

Instead, we'll take our sins into the light that will destroy them — to the light of the cross.

And we do that, not by trying to hide them — either from God (if that were possible) or from each other — but by confessing them.

It's as we confess our sins that we are assured of God's true and complete forgiveness, because Jesus has died to pay for them all.

We don't have to make ourselves look pure.

Jesus has truly made us pure in God's sight.

And our willingness to confess our sins and lay them at the foot of Christ's cross is a sure sign that we are in fellowship with him.

And that fellowship extends to all of us who have fellowship with God as we are brought into fellowship with one another...

...a fellowship where we can confidently and freely confess our sins to one another when we do and say things we shouldn't.

It comes back to the second sign post.

We live and act as who we already are as believers in fellowship with God through Christ.

And that includes asking God to destroy the darkness of sin that would otherwise destroy our fellowship with him and each other — rather than continuing to live in that darkness, or to justify it, or to ignore it.

As you walk this week, and every day of your life, will you keep an eye on these signs to make sure you're on the right track?