

1, 2, 3 John: Introduction

Let us turn now to the epistles of John. I would like to begin with a question: How are the epistles of John different from the epistles of Paul? How do they read differently? His letters are more personable, for one thing. John is always writing to his friends, his children, and his dear children. He uses the language of children, the language of friends. John's letters can be easier to understand. I think it is true that Paul has dozens of themes, but in John, a few themes just keep coming up over and over again. It is interesting that Paul's style is very different. He tells who he is and what he is writing about. He tells what the problem is. He gives more information about the circumstances, whereas John, especially in 1 John, gives less information. I am going to say that 1 John feels more like a treatise, in the sense that it could stand as an essay. You do not really know who his friends are. You do not know where they are located. You know that something is bothering him but you do not quite know what it is. He seems to be writing with a little sense of timelessness, as if he is writing to every Christian, because he does not say "to the church at Galatia" or "to the church at Philippi" or something. There is one clue in these letters as to why John is writing. There is one statement that we might tend to skip over, but it is actually very important in understanding the atmosphere of John. It is found in 1 John 2:18-19. He says, "My dear children, this is the last hour, and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come." This is how we know that there is a last hour, although we do not know exactly in the same way that we know about Paul and the Judaizers or about the problems in the church of Corinth. In those cases we know exactly what the problem is, but we only know that John is very upset about something. It is the hour of the antichrist. That is strong language, but we do not know what it means yet. Verse 19 of the same chapter says, "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us, for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us, but their going shows that none of them belong to us." This is a crucial problem for the people of 1 John. Leaders within the church left. You must understand that they did not leave in the sense of going from a Presbyterian church to a Baptist church or from a community church to a charismatic church. There was only one church. There were no denominations. The church was a small and oppressed minority, and these leaders left. They left the faith. They departed. There are indications that this might have been a substantial group. They might very well have been teachers, because John spends a lot of time speaking against the errors of this group, as if to deal with the fact that they did not just leave because they wanted an easier life. They left because they were teaching something very different, and they may well have tried to take others with them in that teaching.

The occasion of the letter is conflict in the church; a group has seceded and attempted to lead others astray. Look at chapter 2:26, which says, "I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray." They did not just leave. They said, "You come with us. Come on with us," into what John calls "this error." He goes on to call them antichrists. In chapter 4:1, he says, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, because there are many false prophets." He seems to be working with false prophets who have gone out into the world. He says, "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God. Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit who does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."

Some people think about the antichrist as someone who is to appear in the last seven years as a final outbreak of evil bursting onto the earth. They think the antichrist is for the last few years. However, when does John say the antichrist appears? He says that the antichrist is already there. Many people become overly concerned about the antichrist and try to decide who the antichrist is. Some people say that it is the head of the UN, or there are all kinds of other speculations. Do you notice how, at least for Americans, it is never somebody from America? No one ever suggests anybody in their own group as

the antichrist, but that kind of thinking is all wrong. The antichrist is simply someone who is anti-Christ. The antichrist is against Christ. There are many antichrists. We do not deny that there will be one final antichrist who is called the antichrist, but there are many antichrists. They speak against Christ in His ministry and His nature. They are deceivers, 2 John 7 says, and they have to be watched. What is this antichrist teaching? 1 John 4:2 says that every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. Therefore, these false teachers probably teach that Jesus the Christ or the Son of God did not come in the flesh. They have some problem with the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity: "He did not come in the flesh. He is not the Christ." There is also something else they seem to teach. They seem to teach it is possible for Christians to live a sin-free life. We will see that in a few minutes.

This teaching causes doubt in the church, when the body splits in half and false teachers are presenting their doctrines. 1 John 5:13 tells us why he wrote. 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." The purpose of the book is to give assurances to those who deserve it, but also to correct those who think they are saved but who have no real basis to think they are saved. "Soteric status" is my big-word way of saying, "Are you saved or not?" "Self-awareness" is another way of asking the question "Do you know it or not?" There are four ways that we can stand before God. The worst-case scenario is if you are lost and do not know it. That means you are not saved and you have no awareness of that fact. The second possibility is that you can be lost, but at least you know it. That is better. Then you may at least be open to the Gospel and open to instruction. The third scenario is you can be saved, but you do not know that, so you live with doubt and self-recrimination, questioning yourself and questioning God's love. The fourth possibility, which is the best, is that you are saved and you know it. That is called having assurance. 1 John 5:13 says, "I write you these things so that you may know you have eternal life." That is what he is trying to do. It is the purpose of the church and of good teachers to comfort the afflicted, but also to afflict the comfortable. You must afflict those who are falsely comforted and who falsely think they are alright with God. If they are not alright with God, it is an improvement if they realize they are in trouble. On the other hand, it is the responsibility of good Christian leaders to comfort those who are falsely afflicted—those who question themselves and doubt themselves and say, "How could God love someone like me?" What John is trying to do, then, is actually to bring people to the two categories where the truth matches their awareness by putting out certain tests of genuine faith. He wants them either to be saved and know it, or if they are lost, at least they will know that, but he wants to bring these people to a level of self-awareness. That is the purpose of John.

1 John is a personal treatise on the subject of whether or not you are saved and how to instruct dear children about false teachers. It is written by John the apostle, whom I believe to be one of the 12, an eyewitness of Christ's life. We will talk about his way of describing the experience of Christ. He calls himself "the elder." He does not call himself an apostle. He calls himself "the elder," and the reason why he does that is that by this time he was very old. It is very likely that these letters of John were written between 85 and 95 A.D. If Jesus died and rose in the year 30 A.D., and if John was only 25 at that time, then by this time he is about 80, 85, or even 90 years old, so he is an elder. It is also a non-aggressive way of saying that he has authority over the church. John is writing in order that the church may know that they have eternal life. Who has eternal life? Those who believe in the name of the Son of God. That is an important question not only for the past, but also for the present.

What are some reasons why people can doubt their salvation? I am talking about people who are Christians, people who belong to the Lord. Why do some have trouble accepting that? One reason would be guilt because of great sins. There is also the reverse of that, which is a failure to do good works, perhaps because of things like lethargy. Some people ask, "If I am a Christian, why do I not have more

zeal, more passion? Why I am not willing to sacrifice more?" They question themselves because of that. Some people feel they have failed God—"I had a chance to do something for the Lord and I did not do it." Some people are emotional people who follow their feelings. They do not feel saved, so they do not believe that they are. Some people are in love with skepticism, people who do not want to commit. Some people are at ease questioning everything. They do not want to come down and settle. Some people have endless questions, and they might ask, "Is there an answer for all my questions?"

Did you know that the Catholic Church explicitly teaches that you cannot know that you have eternal life? In fact, they teach that it is actually highly presumptuous to say, "I know that I am redeemed." They say that you never know when you might commit a mortal sin, and really only a saint can have that vision or knowledge of God. They say that it is a gift that God gives only to very, very few, because you never know when you may spurn God. They put grace within a sacramental system, which basically says that to advance spiritually, you have to partake of the sacraments in a certain order.

Another reason why people might question is the feeling that God had failed them. This would be something like when someone dear to us dies. Perhaps your husband or wife dies when they are just 30 years old, or you lose a child. That could cause people to question their salvation. The book of 1 John says that it can be caused by seeing people you admire—leaders, fellow Christians—leave the church. That is what he sees. There are many others, like "How can God permit suffering?" and lots of other questions.

How do you answer the question, "How can I know that I am saved and that I am right with God?" John's approach in 1 John—which is all about this assurance of salvation and knowing you belong to God—is to blend the subjective and the objective answer. The objective answer is this: John says, "I saw Christ. I touched Him. I am a witness. It is true. Jesus Christ came in the flesh. My testimony is true." The subjective answer is that we have assurance from the Holy Spirit. 1 John 3:24 says that those who obey His commands live in Him and He lives in them, and we know that He lives in us by the Spirit He gave us. 1 John 4:13 says that we know that we live in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. These two things give us assurance and the ability to know that we are saved.

Those who trouble the church have errors that are opposed to that. One of their errors, apparently, was that they had a hard time with the bodily life of Jesus Christ. We read about that in 1 John 4:2-3. These false teachers minimized the bodily life of Jesus. There was a man who lived around this time named Cerinthus, who was one of the first known heretics of the early church. His heresy was saying that Jesus was just a man, a carpenter from Nazareth. He became the Son of God at His baptism, when the Holy Spirit came down upon Him. Right before the crucifixion, the Spirit left Him, because God could never suffer crucifixion. According to Cerinthus, when Jesus said, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" that was because the Holy Spirit left Him. In general, this seems to be a part of a Greek idea that bodily life is not that important or not fully worthy of God or the gods. The Greek idea is that the body is a prison-house for the soul and we really need to be free from it. Some Greeks had a hard time believing that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. It was very difficult for them to accept that the man Jesus is very God. If you have a hard time believing it, that can lead to other problems. It could lead to the idea that God does not really care about bodily life very much, so it is not that important what we do with our bodies so we can live licentiously. Another problem with this teaching is that it would make it difficult for Jesus to be the Savior. It would detract from His atonement if Jesus' physical suffering was just the man Jesus, but the Holy Spirit had left. It would make the cross almost irrelevant, and that would undercut the idea that Jesus is the Savior of the world. These false teachers did deny that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:22). They did deny the Son (1 John 2:23), and they denied that Jesus came in the flesh (1 John 4:1-3 and also 2 John 7).

Once you start not worrying about bodily life, you can go two different ways. One possibility is to go in the direction of license and living in sin. John, in 1 John 3:6-10, says that you cannot live in sin if you are born of God. You do not commit sin, you cannot sin. Whoever does not do right is not of God. That is 1 John 3:6-10.

Another possibility, when you have determined that bodily life is not that important, is that you do not scrutinize it very carefully, and you become falsely convinced that you are just about perfect. Have you ever known anyone like this? You ask them what sins they struggle with, and they say that they do not really struggle with any. Then you might ask if they can name any sins they have committed, and they say they cannot really think of any. Have you ever had that kind of conversation? People like that do not have a sense of how bad sin is. John talks about that, as well. He says that if we say we have not sinned, we make God a liar and His word is not in us (1 John 1:10). If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8). He seems to be concerned with people who think that sin is a matter of the past and is not a problem for them at all.

How can we know that we belong to the Lord? There are three tests to tell whether you belong to the Lord or not. Test #1 is moral. The moral test is, we know that we have come to know Him if we obey His commandments. Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did. The moral test is basic obedience. It is necessary to qualify this test: no Christian is sinless. Anyone who claims to be sinless is a liar. We all have to ask for forgiveness, yet we do not walk in sin. We do sin, but we resist sin as a way of life. The Christian is someone who is miserable when he or she sins. If you sin, God gives you a sense of guilt and unhappiness and uneasiness. If you know you committed a sin, you really are miserable for a half a day or so, because that is not habitual. You do not walk in that.

Test #2 is the social test: love of the brothers. 1 John 3:14-18 and 1 John 4:7-8 are key passages here. John says that we know that we have passed from death into life because we love the brothers. God is love. All love comes from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God. Whoever does not love does not know God. We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers. Love here is not a feeling or an emotion, but rather is demonstrated love.

Test #3 is theological: good doctrine. A true Christian believes that Jesus is the Son of God (1 John 5:5). He believes that Jesus has come in the flesh (1 John 4:1-4). He believes that Jesus is the Savior of the world (1 John 4:14 and also 1:5-2:6). You might ask whether these three tests handle all of these questions that we raised earlier, the reasons why people might not have assurance. The answer is yes and no. These tests bypass some of these issues. They do not address the problem of somebody who says, "I don't feel saved." John says, "Get over it. Your feelings really are not that all-important. Are you walking with the Lord? Are you loving your brothers? Do you confess to true faith? Rebuke your feelings." What about a skeptic who says, "I do not have an answer to the question of what happens to those who live in Madagascar in the third century and never heard about Christ." That is not really the problem. The problem is you. You have heard about Christ; what do you confess and what do you say? For others of the questions we discussed, John has a direct answer—for example, for the questions about good works, great sins, and so on. That is the purpose of 1 John.

How can we be sure that we are saved? We have looked at kind of a survey of the entire book, and now I would like to look at one passage in particular, and pick up some ideas from a careful examination. I am reading from 1 John 1:1-4:

That 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. 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. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.

Do you see the repetition of these phrases with regard to the idea of witnessing? “We have seen, we have heard, we have seen and heard, we witnessed, and we testify.” John wants to make it clear that he is a witness of this. I have talked to you before about Greek tenses and moods and so forth. There are a number of different tenses in this passage. John is very interested in making sure that we get the impression clearly that he himself was a witness. There are certain verb tenses that we use in languages, like the present tense, which express what is happening now, or the aorist tense, which is the normal Greek past tense. There is a tense in Greek called the perfect tense. The perfect tense conveys the idea that a past action has continuing consequences. Something happens in the past and it still makes a difference today. One of the clearest ways of understanding this is a phrase you read in the Bible a number of times: “It is written.” The phrase, “It is written,” is in the perfect tense, because it was written in the past, but the fact that it is written has ongoing consequences, because it stands as something authoritative. It remains written. That is the idea. Many of the verbs in this section are in the perfect tense: “We have seen, we have touched,” meaning, “We did it, and the consequences still stand, because I am reliably testifying of it to you. Jesus has come in the flesh. We have seen Him. We looked at Him. We touched Him.” Do you know the difference between touching someone and handling them? He says “we touched,” but he also says “our hands handled.” Touching could be a moment of brief contact, but handling involves much more. John is saying, “I did not just have some slight physical contact with Him.” He is saying, “I handled Him,” meaning they were at sea one time and they all bumped into each other and John felt the weight of Jesus’ body—His bones, muscles, sinews, tendons. Or think of when they were reclining at a meal, they would be very close to each other physically, breaking bread and passing on the bread. Their hands would touch and you would feel the fingers.

Do you know those pictures of Jesus with curly hair and really pale skin and these big luminescent brown eyes like a baby’s eyes? He looks so weak. He looks so androgynous. Jesus was a carpenter. I do not think he had long, delicate fingers. I think he had big, thick, rough fingers, and I think His hands and arms and legs were strong. I think He was lean and tough. He was a real man. He worked with His hands. When He traveled, He walked hundreds of miles. When you bumped into Jesus, it was not like bumping into a pillow, and so John says he handled Him. He was the eyewitness. He was there.

This was real touching. John says, “I was there. I touched Him, I handled Him. This is a real man with a real body. I testified to you.” That is the objective testimony. We have not seen Christ, but He is a real man embodied. The Gospel says who Jesus is and it also says what He did, and that is described in 1 John chapter 1:5 through chapter 2:6. One theme in this passage is an interest in the atoning work of Christ. John is also interested in clearing up what could be a misunderstanding. As he is saying that a true Christian loves and obeys, he wants to make it very clear that real Christians do sin and Christ provides the remedy for that. I want you to notice the way he describes the work of Christ in chapter 1:8-9. In verse 9, he says, “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.” That means that we are progressively purified. As we walk in light, we are being purified. Verse 8 says, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from unrighteousness.” Do you notice how in those two verses, there is a little variation with the word “sin”? The first time it is mentioned, it is “sin,” and the second time it is

mentioned, it is “sins.” John intends to make it clear to us that we have a problem with “sin” and a problem with “sins.” They are two connected things. On the one hand, we sin as a quality. We also commit sins, because we are captives to sin. Because there is a sin principle at work in us, we commit various sins. The sins come out of our sinfulness—out of our unrighteousness, as verse 8 says. If we say we do not have a problem here, if we claim to be without sins, we deceive ourselves. We are saying we do not have a problem when we do have a problem. Besides that, if we say we never sin, verse 10 says that we make God into a liar. How do we make God a liar when we say we do not sin? You would think he would be saying that we make ourselves liars if we say we have not sinned, but John says, “No, you are making God a liar.” How do you make God a liar when you say you have not sinned? There are at least two ways and maybe three. First, you are saying to God, “Your standards of holiness, the Ten Commandments and all the rest, do not really matter. They do not really tell us what things are sin,” because the truth is we do not keep them, so if we say we are not sinners, then we are saying those laws are not really important. Secondly, God says that we are sinners, and if we say that we are not, then we are saying, “I am right and You are wrong, God.” Third, if we say we do not have any sin, we make God into a liar in a deeper sense, in that we make the atonement of Christ into a senseless thing. What I mean is that if we are not sinners, if we just commit sins, and we do not have a problem with sin as a quality, then what did Jesus die for, anyway? What was the purpose of the incarnation? If all we do is just commit a few minor sins from time to time and break a few social customs and exercise “inappropriate behavior” (that lovely phrase people use today to describe everything from scratching your head too much to firing guns in school), then what did Jesus come for, anyway?

Let me use an illustration that I got from one of my professors. He says that if you think about the atonement of Christ, and deny that it was necessary, that changes everything. Imagine a railroad yard. It has dozens of tracks, with cars and engines slowly moving around and getting the various cargos in the proper position to be shipped. They have a little tower like at an airport and someone is in the tower and he is controlling all the traffic. Suppose that a little child who has no sense of the danger, but maybe a little sense of excitement, wanders into the yard and, in fact, is wandering right into the path of a track down which a train is moving slowly. Suppose that a worker at the yard sees the child and can tell that the child is headed very clearly into danger. He dashes from where he is as fast as he possibly can, sees that he only has one chance to save the child’s live and so he hurls himself across the track and pushes the child out of the way. But he himself is slain in the process, because he could not get out of the way in time. We would call such a man a hero. But what if the man was, in fact, in the tower, and he could have averted the problem by simply pressing a little switch so that the train would have moved effortlessly onto another track? If, instead of pressing the switch, he chose to dash down the steps across the yard and throw himself in front of the train and be killed in the process, we would call him a fool. The point is about God in the tower and us wandering across the tracks. If there was a way for God to redeem us short of the death of His Son and He did not choose it, what would we call that? The very fact that God sent His Son indicates that there was no other way. For one thing, we have prophets in the Old Testament and they told the truth, but they never reformed anybody. The priests did their rituals but they never saved anybody. The kings led but they led poorly. The judges need to be judged themselves on many occasions. No redeemer is going to come from the entire Old Testament, but if you say you are not a sinner and you do not have a problem with sin, you make God out to be a liar and a fool. If we did not have a problem with sin that was leading to death, why on earth did God send His Son? He would be foolish, not to mention loveless, to do that.

I want to make it clear that God does not absolutely have to redeem us. We understand that our redemption is an act of His sovereign determination and love and choice. He is not under any obligation to do that, but once He decides to redeem us, then we say with the New Testament witness that Jesus is the only Savior. He is the one who had to save us. This idea that Jesus is the Savior who delivers us from

sin is described in 1 John 2:1-2. “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense.” We have an advocate. The term that is used here is a very legal term. “Jesus Christ, the righteous one, is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not only for our sins, but also for the sins of the whole world.” Some of you might know that this word “atoning sacrifice” is often translated as “propitiation.” The word “propitiation” is falling out of favor these days, for one thing because people get tired of big words and they want to make everything easy to understand, and also the word is easily misunderstood. In fact, I will tell you that I used the word “propitiation” in a sermon last Sunday in a large church with 1500 people there. After the service, I spoke with someone who was clearly not a member of that church—it was a very definitely evangelical church—and as he left, he said, “I enjoyed your sermon, but I was surprised with your magical conception of the universe.” I said, “What?” He said, “Well, propitiation and all that.” What he was thinking of is an idea prevalent in liberal churches that “propitiation” is a concept not worthy of God.

In the ancient world the act of propitiation was deeply tainted by false concepts—specifically, the idea was that the gods often became angry capriciously, and the only way to get them to stop being angry with you was to offer a really big gift or something to buy back their favor. This idea is prevalent in Greek mythology. A clear example would be in the Trojan War when the troops went over to rescue Helen, there was no wind for a couple of weeks so the ships could not move forward. Agamemnon, who was in charge of the fleet, wondered why there was no wind for so long, and someone said, “It’s because the gods are angry,” so he sent back and had his daughter offered as a human sacrifice to appease the wrath of the god. The idea was that the gods get angry and nobody knows why and you have to give them a big gift. The more important the god is, the bigger the gift needs to be, and you give a big gift by sacrificing something precious to you. People say that is repugnant and they are right. It is repugnant to think that you can buy the favor of the gods by sacrificing your child. However, “propitiation” is the word here, and we have to realize that propitiation can be misconstrued, but it can also be properly understood. The proper understanding is that God is angry at human sin. Greek gods were angry capriciously and without any good reason, but the living God is really angry at sin—even as we, brothers and sisters, ought to be angry at sin and not to be jaded toward sin.

I will never forget when my first child was just a few months old and I was driving around and I heard a story on the radio. A man was driving drunk in California at 10 o’clock in the morning. His car jumped the curb, drove onto the sidewalk and hit some children and killed one of them. This same man had been arrested the night before for drunk driving, and the law in California said that if someone has been arrested for drunk driving more than twice, that person must be put in jail for two weeks, and this was the fourth time he had been arrested for drunk driving in the last month and the judge did not put him in jail. He just let him go. When you hear something like that, you are just completely angry. You say, “That was unspeakable. The actions of both the drunk man and the judge—how could they do that? He killed a child. And how could the judge allow him to drive when that was clearly against the law? That is horrific.” Most of you would probably have some sense of that anger. Anger is not wicked; it is part of the image of God. It is right for us to be angry at sin. We ought to be angry at sin toward our fellow man. We ought to be angry at self-destructive acts and rebellion or hatred toward God. That is right. God is justly angry, and Jesus is a propitiatory sacrifice to put away that wrath—not to buy it off, but there is something that really needs to be set right, and Jesus says, “I will do what it takes. I will bear the punishment and the anger that evildoers deserve.” God is a just God. He cannot pass over sin. He is just and He is holy, and Jesus as an act of love offers Himself as the remedy and as the one who will bear the anger of God. That is the language that is used here. Jesus is a propitiation for us.

There are some other words that are used in the Bible to describe this sacrifice, and I will go through them quickly. “Atonement” is the broad word that covers all these terms. It means to be united with God

again, to be one, atonement means “at-one”-ment. The word was, in fact, coined for that purpose. A theologian made it up and people started using it. So “atonement” means being at one with God. There are four main words used in the Bible. The word “atonement” is actually a later invention of the church, and it covers the ideas of all of the others, like an umbrella over all those terms.

The first word is “propitiation,” and it is from the realm of the cult of religion, of sacrifice, of priests who want to help the people get right with God and put away God’s anger. The second word is “justification,” which is a courtroom word. The idea is that mankind appears before God and has to render account for the deeds done in the body, whether good or evil. We are called before God as judge. That is a common image of God in the Bible, and God, the judge, is ready to declare us guilty. We are guilty and we expect to be found guilty, but Jesus comes in and says, “I will bear their guilt for them.” So He bears our punishment and that would leave us neutral so far. When Jesus takes our punishment, we don’t have any bad deeds. Not only does He do that, but we are also clothed in the righteousness of Christ, so that when God looks at us, He sees Christ’s good deeds and He justifies us. That means that He declares us righteous. “To justify” means “to declare righteous” or “to declare innocent.”

The third word that is used is the word “redemption,” which is from the realm of commerce. When you redeem something, you buy it back. You regain somebody. The word was used originally of slaves. If somebody falls into slavery, you buy them back out of slavery, like Hosea did with his wife. We have fallen under the control of an evil master—sin, Satan, death—and Jesus buys us out of that slavery. He redeems us.

The fourth term is “reconciliation,” which is from the realm of personal relationships. The idea is that when we sin against someone, there is a breach in the relationship. There is estrangement, but Jesus does what is necessary to end that estrangement. Reconciliation is ending the breach caused by an offense, but I do not solve the breach which I have caused. Here is what can happen when we sin. We offend God, and then we feel bad, so we run away from God. We want to avoid God. God comes to us. He does not wait for us to come back saying, “Can we be reconciled? God, can I be reconciled?” He comes to us first. He reconciles us to Himself, as Paul says. Those are the four main words that are used to describe getting right with God. The one that John uses here is the first of them—the word “propitiation.”

So to summarize 1 John, what does John want to do? John wants to be sure that we know that we belong to God. He wants to startle the presumptuous out of their presumption. He wants to afflict the falsely comforted—“if you don’t pass these tests, you are not a Christian,”—but he also wants to comfort the afflicted—“if you are having doubts, you can be sure you belong to Christ.” He wants to present the objective testimony about Christ—touching Him, His ministry, His sacrifice. He wants to present the subjective test, and he says, “Look at yourself. If you are fundamentally loving the brothers, and fundamentally walking with God, then take courage from that. Do not let your feelings lead you astray.”

2 and 3 John pick up many of same themes as 1 John. Some are denying the incarnation of Jesus, some are claiming sinlessness, and so forth. I am not going to talk about those, since we have already covered them. These two letters both deal with a practical problem—how do you handle and how do you approach traveling Christian missionaries? You have to understand why this problem would even come up. There is no mission board. There are no fax machines, no telephones, and no banks. The Gospel spreads by Christians going around from place to place sharing the good news, but the problem is that there are also false teachers. What do you do? How do you tell the difference? The church grew in its infancy because of Christian travelers who constantly viewed their travel as an opportunity to spread the Gospel. In ancient times, you would not want to stay at an inn, because they were places that were routinely associated with gambling, drinking, prostitution, and so forth. You would try to stay with

somebody you knew, if that was at all possible. The difficulty is that just as a good teacher would want a place to stay with a church, so would a bad teacher. Because of this problem, John said essentially two things. In 2 John, he said, "Do not welcome false teachers," and in 3 John, he said, "Do welcome true messengers." That is basically the important point of these two letters. In 2 John 10 and 11, it says, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work."

I am not someone who takes the Bible hyper-literally, but I do apply this literally to Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses who come to my door. I do not let them in and offer them lemonade, water or iced tea. I want them to be miserable. I want them to feel, "This is horrible and I cannot wait to quit." I want them to quit and I want them to feel discouraged. Occasionally, I do talk to them and when I talk to them, I do not make everything seem nice and happy. When they say, "You are a Christian and I am a Christian, so let's have a chat," I say, "I am a Christian and you are not a Christian, so let's have a chat." I have never said those exact words, but that is the point that I am making. I have told Mormons on my porch, "Stop lying to me. Stop telling me that you have an orthodox Christology, because you do not. And you know that you don't." When there are two Mormons together and one of them is training the other, I find out which one is the leader and I say, "Don't stand on my porch and deny your doctrine. You have a Mormon standing right beside you. Don't pretend you're the same as me. Don't deny your higher teachers. You know that you do not believe that Jesus is the one and only Son of God, and why would you deny your teaching to win me at the cost of misleading your own disciple?" You should see the disciple's eyes when I say these things. You should see them leave in a hurry. I am glad to disrupt them, and I am glad that I do not give them anything to eat or drink and do not pat them on the back and do not pretend we are having a nice little religious chat. I say, "You are a heretic. I am a Christian. I am willing to talk about that, if you'd like to talk, but we are not the same." I do apply that literally, so if you are going to talk to them, do not be real sweet and ultra-polite, unless they are starting to be open to changing their views. Then you can start to be nice to them, but I do take 2 John 10 in that way. Now I want to make it clear that I am using a little bit of hyperbole right here. I am not saying that you should be unkind or unloving towards people, but I do not let them pretend that we are all agreeing on everything.