

# **1 JOHN**

Part 2: “Hidden in Christ”

1 John 1:5–2:2

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## **Scripture Reading**

“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. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 1:5–2:2).

## **Introduction**

In the year 1850 [**1Hawthorne**], a middle-aged writer by the name of Nathaniel Hawthorne published his first full-length novel. The name of this work was *The Scarlet Letter*, and many scholars of literature would call it the first great American novel. It is a tragic story about sin, guilt, and redemption that remains deeply relevant even today.

The book is set during the 1600s in Boston, Massachusetts. And in this early colonial era of American history, Boston was a rigidly religious community governed by the Puritans. The Puritans created a society of hard work and deep devotion that gave birth to many of the early industries and institutions<sup>1</sup> of America. But Hawthorne observed how the often-harsh legalism of Puritan society also bred hypocrisy and hidden sin beneath a veil of self-righteousness within this colonial culture. [**2 The Scarlet Letter**]And it is that dark side of religious culture that Hawthorne explores in *The Scarlett Letter*.

The primary character of this story is a young woman named Hester Prynne. At the beginning of the story, we discover that she has made a very serious and sinful mistake that she cannot hide [**3Hester Prynne**]. She is publicly exposed and shamed, and she is

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<sup>1</sup> This includes the establishment of Harvard University, which was initially birthed as a seminary to train pastors.

forced to wear a bright red letter—a *scarlet* letter—on her clothing for the rest of her life as a reminder to herself and everyone else of her sin.

Yet, there is another character in the story named Arthur Dimmesdale. He is a young, gifted, and very kind priest who is well-loved and respected within his community [4Arthur Dimmesdale]. Yet, he, too, has committed a serious sin. But unlike the woman with the outward scarlet letter, he can keep his mistake hidden from the community around him. And that is exactly what he does.

For years, Hester is rejected and treated poorly by those around her. However, the worst thing about her has already been exposed to the light of day, so she has nothing to lose by taking responsibility for her actions. So, in an odd way, what once was Hester's shame becomes the source of her freedom. She is liberated from constantly needing to pretend that she is more righteous than she really is. Yet, at the same time, she is portrayed as strong and resilient. She is kind and compassionate and even cares for the sick and poor of her community, including those who once shunned her.

Unlike Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale is ridden with guilt and shame. He is a hypocrite, and he knows it. And the *hiddenness* of his secret sin becomes a self-made prison. And the longer his sin is hidden in the darkness, the more powerful it grows. He eventually withers into physical weakness and mental anguish as his guilt consumes him from the inside out. At the end of the tale, his secret sin becomes his ruin and death.

In the unfolding of this tragic romance, Hawthorne shows us the counter-intuitive truth that there is freedom in exposure and honesty. Likewise, there is an invisible captivity in hidden sin and hypocrisy. As Hawthorne writes, *"No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the truth."*

You don't have to look hard to observe that there is more than just a little bit of a parallel between the world of *The Scarlet Letter* and our own world in Bible-belt America. Even among Christians, there is an immense internal pressure to pretend to be okay when we are *not* okay. And that pressure is compounded by a culture that far is more prone to shame and gossip about those who struggle rather than seek their healing or restoration.

Too often, we have seen example after example of how dark things grow in the dark. Yet, few of us are willing to take the risk of exposure. Moreover, there are far too few places and too few relationships that are safe enough to share where we are broken and how we struggle.

But I want you to know that there is a better way. Indeed the gospel of Jesus Christ invites us into a better. We will meet nothing but slavery and captivity when we remain hidden in sin. But we will find life and freedom when we are *"Hidden in Christ."*

So, it is with that thought in mind that I want to explore today's passage from the New Testament book of 1 John. We will organize our discussion of this text under three headings. We will talk about **1.) Christ Our Light, 2.) Christ Our Advocate, and 3.) Christ Our Sacrifice.**

## **Exposition**

### **1) Christ Our Light**

John wants us to know that God is light and that we are called to walk in the light. Throughout all his New Testament writings, this theology of light is central to how the Apostle John understands who Jesus is, what the gospel is, and what it means to be a Christian.<sup>2</sup> Look again at verse 5 of our text today, ***"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"*** (1 John 1:5).

But John is not just using a vague spiritual metaphor. In this same passage, he will get super practical about what it means to walk in the light. And for John, walking in the light is deeply connected to the regular practice of Christian *confession*.

Look back at our passage: ***"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"*** (1 John 1:6–9).

I want to call your attention to the word *"confess"* (ὁμολογῶμεν) in verse 9. To *"confess"* simply means to come into agreement and concede that something is factual and true; to confess is to admit that we have sinned. And, within the history of Christianity, confession of sin is meant to be a part of our regular prayer life, in which we pray, *"...forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors."*

However, if you look at the history of Christian worship, confession of sin and assurance of pardon have also been core components of what Christians do when we gather to

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<sup>2</sup> Remember, 1 John is an epistle (or official letter) written to a group of churches by the Apostle John. John is one of the original twelve disciples, and he is also the author of the gospel, according to John. When you read John's gospel, right from the very beginning, you can see that John sees Jesus as the transcendent word of God and the word of life. But, crucially, he also sees Jesus as the light of God who has come into the world. He writes, *"In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"* (John 1:4–5). And all throughout the rest of John's gospel, he will come back to this theme of light over and over again. In John 3, Jesus says, *"...the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil"* (John 3:19). In John 8, he says, *"...I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"* (John 8:12). In John 12, he says, *"I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness"* (John 12:46).

worship. For centuries and across different cultures, when Christians gather to worship, they have heard the preaching of God’s word, they have sung songs of worship, they have partaken in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper, and they have confessed their sins and celebrated God’s forgiveness together.

But in the last century of American Christianity, there has been an impulse to streamline worship to eliminate any margin, any white space, and anything viewed as non-essential. And so, tragically, there has been a tendency to eliminate the moment of time when we come together to quiet our hearts before the Lord to confess the ways we have sinned in thought, word, and deed; to confess how we have sinned in what we have done, and by what we have not done; to confess that we have failed to love God with all our hearts and we have failed to love our neighbors as ourselves—and for that reason, we need to be forgiven. And by failing to do this, we miss an opportunity to be honest with ourselves, lay our burdens before our God, and rest in his grace.

That is why we intentionally practice confession together as a congregation week after week at Redeemer. We do not view confession as a begrudging duty. Rather, it is a means of grace through which we invite the Holy Spirit to wash us clean and renew us. Even more, it is a spiritual discipline by which what we do *here* forms us and equips us to live more like Christ *out there*.

John tells us when we walk in the light as our God is in the light, we have fellowship, not just with God, but with “*one another*” (ἀλλήλων). This shows us just how deep the practice of confession is meant to go.

John is saying if we are to truly walk in the light, we must confess to God but are also called to confess to *one another*. Confession is meant to be an individual and corporate practice, but it is also meant to be a *communal* practice. And I know the idea of confessing your struggles and your sins sounds terrifying to most of you if not all of you. But John is telling us something we all need to hear.

Now, you might very well be in a place where you would say, “Look, I’ve been hurt by people; I’ve even been hurt by Christians. I don’t know if I can be honest about my struggles with others because I don’t know if I can allow myself to get hurt again.”

I can truly sympathize with that sentiment. But I also know that if Christian relationships were the source of our pain, God will often use Christian relationships as the instrument that heals our pain.

Put simply: you need people in your life that you can be honest with. You need people who can see through any mask that you are tempted to wear. You need people who are close enough to you that they can see your blind spots. You need people who will speak the truth in love, who are able to point your heart toward Jesus, and who will call you out of darkness and into the light.

There is a word for this type of deep Christian community, and that word is “fellowship” (κοινωνία). Christian fellowship is one of the greatest and most essential means through which God’s grace flows in us and through us.

So, I want to encourage you to find a few people in your life who know that they love you and love Jesus and give them permission (and the permission piece is important) to ask you hard questions. Give people permission to confront you when they can tell something is off or you acting out of line. And be willing to be that person for someone else.

Be honest about your struggles. And when someone opens up to you about his or her failure, respond with gentleness and humility—not shaming judgmentalism or pride. As the Apostle Paul writes in Galatians, *“Brothers if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself”* (Gal 6:1–3).

We don’t need to be perfect in order to do this. In fact, that’s the whole point. *None* of us are perfect. Our job is to create a place where people feel safe enough to be vulnerable and honest in their failure and then point them to the perfection of Christ and who the Holy Spirit is calling them to be in Christ.

The ultimate aim of Christian fellowship is not to give each other good advice, although it is a blessing to receive wise counsel from others. The ultimate aim of Christian fellowship is to wash one another with good news. It is to remind one another that even in our darkest failures, the grace of God in Christ Jesus is sufficient to forgive us and make us clean. So when it is done well, Christian fellowship is a gift that helps us from stumbling into the twin ditches of self-righteousness and self-condemnation.

My hope is that we can build this type of culture here at Redeemer: in our friendships, in our gospel communities, in all of our ministries. As Dr. Raymond Ortlund Jr. once said, *“Gospel + Safety + Time = Transformation.”*

I pray that we can create an environment where people feel free to be vulnerable, drop their masks, and walk in the light with one another. I pray we can create a culture where we can speak the truth in love, shower one another with the gospel, and grow together in Christ.

## **2) Christ Our Advocate**

I have a very dear friend that I worked alongside in my first ministry job. He came into the office after lunch one day, and he was fuming with anger. When I asked what happened, he told me that he had just been pulled over and given a ticket for failing to fully stop at a stop sign.

He felt that his action put no one in danger, as he saw no oncoming traffic, and he was convinced the law enforcement officer was too much of a stickler. After receiving his citation, he was told he could either pay the fine or contest the ticket in court. My friend curtly and confidently told the officer that he would see him in court, to which the officer nonchalantly responded, “Okay, see you then.”

My friend told me all of this after lunch, and I asked him if he truly intended to dispute this in court. He told me that he was completely serious and that he intended to defend himself in court. After all, he was pretty smart, quick on his feet, and a good arguer, so how hard could it be, right?

Well, he went to trial, he defended himself, and he lost the case in less than fifteen minutes. Apparently, the prosecuting attorney tricked him into admitting that he had indeed failed to stop at a stop sign. When he protested and said he had a good reason regarding why he did not stop all the way, the judge stated, “It doesn't matter; you just admitted to breaking the law; the defendant is guilty, case closed.” My friend was humbled by the experience and, in a twist of fate, became an attorney.

So, in case you ever find yourself in legal trouble, I would highly advise you to not try and defend yourself. You need an attorney. You need an *advocate*.

Likewise, when it comes to dealing with the problem of our sins, we should not try to defend ourselves. We should not try to justify ourselves. We should not fall prey to the self-deception that we can handle our sins on our own. Indeed, the whole point of the Christian gospel rests on the fundamental truth all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. As John writes, “*If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*” (1 John 1:10).

Now, John is in no sense suggesting that we should take sin lightly or that we should go on sinning without regret. He writes, “*My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin*” (1 John 2:1a). Thus, we are to seek righteousness and practice righteousness. We are to turn away from sin and turn toward God. We are to walk in the light and live in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

But, John says, when we inevitably fall, when we inevitably mess up and find ourselves guilty *yet again* of sin, we are not to wallow in our failure or hide in the darkness. We are to look to our defender. John reminds us of the profoundly comforting truth, “*But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous*” (1 John 2:1b).

My friends, we will most certainly stumble in our Christian journey. But let us commit to stumble toward Jesus together, not away from Jesus and apart from one another.

We stumble toward Jesus because he is our only hope and our only refuge. He is our advocate and our defense. He is our justification and our vindication. For he is Jesus

Christ the righteous. And it is because of the perfect righteousness of Christ that we can come before our Heavenly Father in the very depths of our need.

Have you ever wondered why we pray “in Jesus’s name”? It’s not just a religious way to say “over and out” or “I’m finished now” when we pray. It is because when we pray, we are not praying on the basis of our name, our merit, or our righteousness . We are praying in the name of Jesus, on the basis of the merit of Jesus, and in the flawless righteousness of Jesus.

God does not hear our prayers for help on the basis of our good works. He hears our prayers on the basis of His Son's *perfect* work. And it is because of his Son's perfect work that our Heavenly Father’s throne is no longer a throne of judgment for his people. Instead, it is a throne of *grace*. And it is because of Jesus's perfect work that we can draw near to that throne of grace with boldness. As the author of Hebrews invites us, “*Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*” (Heb 4:16).

### 3) Christ Our Sacrifice

When you read the books of the Old Testament law, like Leviticus, you will find a lot of instructions regarding different sacrifices that the ancient Israelites were to make as a part of their worship of God [show 5Sacrifices].

The sacrificial system was a complex and bloody affair. It was a tangible reminder of the absolute holiness of God, for it was only through the blood of innocent and spotless sacrifices that the sins of God’s people could be atoned for and appeased. And while such sacrifices might seem barbaric to our modern sensibilities, they were intended for one simple truth: that *the wages of sin are death* (cf. Rom 6:23).

And now, moved by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John shows that the sacrifices of the Old Testament were not random acts of animal cruelty. They were signposts that were meant to help us understand what Jesus has accomplished on the cross.

John writes, “*He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world*” (1 John 2:2).

“Propitiation” (ἱλασμός) is a big theological word that means “atoning sacrifice.” By using this word, John is showing us Jesus isn’t just a good moral example for us to follow. He was our substitute. He lived the perfectly righteous life that we could live. He died taking upon himself the penalty of our sin. And because of his sacrifice, all of God’s wrath towards sin and evil and injustice is perfectly satisfied, and now we can know abiding peace with God.

During the time of the Old Testament, sacrifices were offered specifically on behalf of the people of ancient Israel. But the atoning sacrifice made by Christ is not an Israelite-only affair. Jesus’s propitiation is “*also for the sins of the whole world.*” By using this

language, John is reminding his readers that Jesus isn't just the messiah of the Jewish people; he is the savior for people from *all* nations.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, because of what Jesus has done, all of *creation* will one day be made new.

The truth of propitiation shows us if we are trying to deal with our own sin in our own strength, we are not taking sin seriously enough. Our sin was so great that the Son of God had to die in our place. But propitiation also shows us that the love of Christ was so great that he was willing to pay that cost.

The invitation of the gospel is an invitation to live in the security and assurance of that perfect love.

### **Conclusion**

But the temptation to hide, the temptation to walk in darkness rather than the light, is deeply ancient and enduring. In fact, it goes all the way back to the garden.

When Adam and Eve first sinned and rebelled against God, their first conscious thought was of their own exposure. They had sinned, and they feared their frailty and vulnerability. So they sewed fig leaves together to make loincloths to cover themselves, and they attempted to hide from God (see: Gen 3:7).

We, too, contrive self-made fig leaves behind which we hide. We wear masks, and we live lies. We guard ourselves from being truly seen and truly known by others. We attempt in vain to flee the presence of God.

But even in Genesis chapter 3, a chapter known for humanity's fall and divine judgment—God does not abandon his people to the powers of sin and death. He confronts Adam and Eve, yes. He corrects them, sure. He even disciplines them. But then, he does something fascinating that is easy to miss. He clothes them new garments made from animal skins to cover shame [show **6Animal Skins**](Gen 3:21).

Where did these animal skins come from? They came from the first sacrifice ever made, the first substitute God ever provided, and the first blood that was ever shed so that others might live. And this, of course, points us to the final sacrifice, the ultimate substitute, and the blood that cleanses us from all righteousness.

So, people of God, may we rest in this grace and rejoice in our freedom. We no longer need fig leaves, for we can be clothed in the very righteousness of Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:4;

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<sup>3</sup> Compare this to John 17:20, wherein the Apostle quotes Jesus as saying, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word." Here, Jesus prays to God the Father for not only his disciples that are hearing his prayer but also for every Christian disciple of every age to come. The grammatical structure in 1 John 2:2 and this verse in John's Gospel are identical: "ου περι...μονον, 'αλλα και." Furthermore, later on in John 17:23, the Apostle quotes Jesus as using the word "κοσμος" in reference to a group of people who will hear his testimony and become his disciples.



Rev 19:8). We no longer need the darkness, for the light has shown. We no longer need to defend ourselves, for Christ is our advocate. We no longer need to hide in our sin, for we have been hidden in Christ.

AMEN.

## **Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities**

1. Read 1 John 1:5—2:2. What does this passage teach us about walking in the light?
2. Why is confessing our struggles and sins to others so difficult, and how can Christian fellowship help us overcome our fears and insecurities?
3. What are the benefits of having a few people in our lives who can ask us hard questions and confront us when necessary, and how can we cultivate these types of relationships?
4. Why should we not try to defend ourselves when dealing with the problem of our sins, and what is the significance of having Jesus as our advocate?
5. Look up the meaning of the word "propitiation" from 1 John 2:2. What does this word mean, and why is it important?