

THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

A STUDY OF THE NEW LIFE.

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The purpose of this beautiful epistle is clearly stated toward its close—V:13. It was written to believers in order that they might have a clear understanding of what was given to them in the Gospel, and plain, practical proofs of their acceptance thereof furnished in the evidence of their daily lives:—to the end that their faith might be confirmed. If Inspiration judged this necessary to the Christian of John's day, it is no less necessary to us; and the epistle is therefore worthy of our careful and diligent study.

INTRODUCTION. I:1-4

Very much of the clearness and beauty of the book is lost by the arbitrary division into chapters, by which, parts most closely connected are rudely separated to be joined with those with which they have less connection. After a brief introduction (I:1-4) in which John tersely states his position as witness, and therefore teacher, and magnifies his office by the importance of that witnessed and taught, with his characteristic force he plunges at once into his subject, and declares that the first link of the chain of salvation, indeed the very essence of the

LINK I. THE MESSAGE:—LIGHT. CHAPTER I. I:15—II:25

Gospel "message" is Light. From chapter 1:5 to chapter II:25 is John's first chapter, the subject of which is Light. The possession of physical light is clearly demonstrated by the actions of its possessors. They do not grope or stumble as the blind, and the stimulated optic nerve gives the answering manifestation of intelligence.

It is not unreasonable that the possession of spiritual light should be likewise evidenced, and these evidences, making the first three of the famous "Tests of Regeneration", together with their discussion, constitute the chapter on Light.

1ST TEST.—KNOWLEDGE. I:6—II:3.

The first test or evidence of light is Knowledge. (I:6—II:3.) Mists are cleared away, and objects are sharply and distinctly outlined, so that they attract interest and attention and there is no longer occasion for groping or stumbling. It would be preposterous for one (I:6) manifesting the lack of the former and the continuance of the latter to say that he saw. One receiving the benefit of a light is quick to perceive that another receives benefit from the same; hence our fellowship (7), to which, in speaking of its source, John cannot refrain from referring, though he reserves it for a fuller discussion. But sometimes, people who see are careless and stumble, or they are willful and go astray, or they have defective vision and refuse glasses. In these cases, the very light they possess makes the fall or the wandering or the false pride apparent and inexcusable. To deny the fact would make the light "a liar" (10). This is just as true with regard to that Light which lights the soul. There is but one resource—to confess the error or the weakness, acquit the light and accept its guidance. But to the possessor of spiritual light more is promised, for that Light is also the Cleanser (7) and the Advocate (II:1) and the Propitiation (2).

2ND TEST—OBEDIENCE. II:3-14.

The second test of light, or of the possession of light, is Obedience. (II:3-14.) It would be silly for a man to say "I see" and yet walk deliberately against a wall or into a pit from which the light warned him to turn aside. It would be equally silly to say "I see" and then stumble over rocks or through briars when the light re-

vealed a plain, clear road. Are things less silly because they have spiritual relations? Surely not. Therefore he that says of the Light, "I see", and yet does not obey, gives the lie (4) to his own words, and he who obeys the Light is the living proof (5) of the Light's correct guidance. Even as Christ, our Light, is also our Pattern (6), so every follower who walks in the Light becomes a reflected light to those in darkness. And that suggests the next thought. As the possession of physical light awakens in the heart of the possessor a pity for the blind and a desire to assist them, so the possession and enjoyment of the spiritual light awakens like pity and desire toward those who are spiritually blind, or even near-sighted, and one seeks more earnestly to obey the Light (7-14) lest one cause another to stumble or to go astray. "Fathers", "young men", and little children", as each receives the Light, each may abide this test.

3RD TEST—CHOICE, OR PURPOSE. II:15-24.

There is yet one more evidence of the possession of physical light which is likewise an evidence of the possession of the real Light. This is discussed from II:15 to II:24, and may be designated as Choice or Purpose. When a flood of light is turned upon objects, it becomes easy for those who see to distinguish between the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, the substantial and the worthless. For one who is sane to say, "I see" and yet persistently to choose or to seek to secure that which is foul, to turn aside from that which is radiantly beautiful and cling to that which is sombre and ugly, to surrender that which is enduring and rare and costly in order that he may keep that which is of no value and is full of corruption and is soon to be despised, is an absurdity which the mind refuses to accept. The very fact of such abiding choice, or final choice, becomes proof that those eyes never really saw (19-20); while, on the contrary, those who have the Light become convinced of the

superiority of those things which that Light reveals as good (15-24), and henceforth they can be satisfied with nothing else.

LINK II. THE PROMISE:—LIFE. II:25—III:23.

The real second chapter of the epistle extends from II:25 to III:23, and its subject is the second link in the Gospel chain. The first was "the message", and this is "the promise", and John declares that it is life:— as in the natural, so in the spiritual world, following closely in the footsteps of Light. Just as the physical life by its needs and instincts is its own best teacher, so the life granted spiritually is taught by its own anointing (II:27).

4TH TEST. HEADSHIP. II:29—III:2, AND 6TH TEST.  
DESCENT. III:9, 10.

There are two tests under this link that are closely related. They are the fourth (II:29—III:2), and the sixth (III:9, 10), and they disclose Headship and Descent. Life of every form maintains its own peculiar characteristics. We know perfectly well the nature that the lion's progeny will possess, and on the other hand, were we told of certain traits displayed by an animal, we would unhesitatingly say, "That is the offspring of the lion." The Great Head of the spiritual life is righteous, therefore, righteousness must be the inherent quality of all that is born of Him. However latent or obscure this righteousness may seem for a time, it will just as assuredly grow to its full development as the harmless, playful cub will mature into the ferocious, blood-thirsty lion, and then "we shall be like Him" (III:1, 2), and "we shall see Him as He is". This inherent love of righteousness, this invariable choice of the right—that is of Him—whenever the crucial test shall come, is therefore the practical proof of the existence of the Life (9) as its absence is the denial (8). The nature of the Life, as of that of the lion in the cub, may for a time

be disguised by its environment, but when really tested, and sometimes when least expected, it will as certainly be true to its inheritance.

5TH TEST. CAREFULNESS. III:3-5.

The thought of the full development of this right-loving nature suggests the fifth test—Carefulness—(III:3-5). It is the instinct of this Life, whose source, heredity and hope is righteousness, to keep itself pure. It not only seeks the right, and cannot choose wrong when the distinction is clearly perceived, but more, it hates the wrong as a foul impurity, and, becoming conscious that that impurity has left upon it its passing stain, it is restless and unhappy until it is purified in the blood of Him who “was manifested to take away our sins” (5). We have seen that the Christian may stumble through carelessness and be short-sighted almost to blindness, but he has the Light and the Life, and the one will surely reveal impurity and the other will just as surely revolt therefrom. The life that is born from above is careful to purify itself even as its Source and its Pattern and its Hope is pure.

7TH TEST. FELLOWSHIP. III:11-14-22.

There is another test under Life, that is Fellowship (11-14-22)), which John here discusses in full, first reminding us (11) of the relation which it bears to the “message”, (Light), under which head he first referred to it (I:7). We that “have passed from death unto life” love the brethren (14) because they are begotten of the same Spirit are guided by the same Light, and possess the same Life with its inherent traits and instincts. Life is always quick to recognize its kind. It is an old and a true saying that “Birds of a feather flock together”. Shall the Life that is spiritual and eternal be less perceptive and responsive than that which is merely physical and temporal? To be an unailing test, this love for the brethren—because they are brethren—

must be practical (17) and real, in deed and not in word only. It must be a love that leads us (16) "to lay down our lives for the brethren". This does not necessarily mean to die for them—but more—to *live* for them. It is a love that lives and therefore it is a love that gives. It is a love that is as "careful" for the Christ-life in another as in one's self, and therefore it will put no stumbling-block in the brother's way. It is neither sickly, sentimental nor selfish. It is wholesome and pure and helpful, even as the Life from which it springs.

### LINK III. THE COMMANDMENT: LOVE. V:2.

Chapter III of this epistle properly begins with the 23rd verse of the accepted third chapter, and is given to the discussion of the third link which is Love. This is inseparably connected with faith in the Christ and is manifested in our relations to each other. It is, therefore, the expression of the Life and the active result of the Light which precede it. As the Source is righteous and choice of right is inherent, so the Source is Love and love is inherent also.

### 8TH TEST. SUBJECTION. IV:1-5.

The first test under Love and the eighth test in the list is Subjection—IV:1-5. There will be false teachers, and there will be those who claim to be Christians and are not. The soul that is born of God—that has received the Light and manifests the Life—confesses that the man, Jesus, is Jesus Christ, or the Anointed Savior—the Savior who saved *him*, and *the* Anointed of God. This is the confession of personal obligation for personal grace, and therefore it is the confession of personal subjection as the logical consequence of personal, grateful love. The religion of Christ is the religion of a person and deals with the individual. Its "commandment" is belief on the name of Jesus Christ and loving confession of Him as Savior and therefore Lord. He who has realized

himself a sinner and Jesus his personal Savior is glad to confess subjection to Him forevermore. In all of our human relations subjection is the language of personal, grateful love. He who does not in all things confess subjection to Christ, when brought under the test and made fully to comprehend the issue, is proven thereby to have no part in Him—hears not the “commandment” of Love, is a stranger to the “promise” of Life, and has never received the “message” of Light.

## 9TH TEST. RECOGNITION. IV:6-12.

The second test under Love, and the ninth in the list is (6-12) Recognition. This is recognition of the Master and of His Word, even as sheep know the voice of their shepherd—and recognition of the Master’s authority, that His word is law because it is His word, whether spoken by Himself or His inspired servants. “My sheep know my voice, and they follow me: a stranger will they not follow, because they know not the voice of a stranger.” Love is swift and joyous in recognition, and it will not be deceived. But those that are Christ’s not only recognize Him (7) but they recognize His likeness in His followers, even when that likeness is marred or feeble, and, remembering Christ’s love toward them, they love the Christ in the brethren, and the brethren for Christ’s sake (8). But the Divine Love is deep and broad, and it prompted to the greatest self-giving (9, 10) for the sake of those who as yet could give no response. So this Love, inherent in the Christian, recognized the objects of Divine compassion, and manifests itself in self-sacrificing efforts on their behalf (11, 12).

## 10TH TEST. PARTICIPATION. IV:13—V:2.

The last test in the chapter of Love and the tenth in the whole list (IV:13—V:2) is Participation and is suggested by the last thought in the test preceding. Love is in sympathy with the loved one—enters into joys and sorrows—understands things beyond the grasp of a

stranger—shares toil as well as reward, and reverses as gladly as prosperity. He who has Christ's love in him participates (14) in Christ's love to mankind, and remembering how utterly undeserving (16) he was of the Master's love, he does not wait for those upon whom the Master has compassion to be deserving before he exercises his own. It is this participation in Christ's love that constrains the love of the Christian to seek its expression in the missionary idea, urging him to seek and to save all those for whom Jesus lived and died. It is this participation in Christ's love (17) that casts out fear, seeking to obey the Father as He obeyed—as the expression of love; that values (V:1, 2) what He values; and that counts all things but loss for Christ, even as He counted all things but loss for the glory of the Father.

LINK IV. THE LOVE—LIBERTY. V:3-10.

Chapter IV of the epistle, properly beginning with the third verse of the fifth chapter, has for its subject the fourth link, Liberty, in direct sequence after Love. "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments and His commandments are not grievous." Liberty does not mean non-subjection to law; that is license, is incompatible with love, and is productive only of harm. Liberty is right recognition of the supremacy of law, and voluntary, glad submission thereto. Then the law is no longer an irksome yoke, but a help to avoid wrong. This is the effect of the Love that is in Christ Jesus, and this is the true Liberty of the soul.

11TH TEST. MASTERY. V:4-9.

The first test under this link, and the eleventh in the list is Mastery—V:4-9. The regenerate soul, through love, is free in Christ, and all things are in subjection to Christ—therefore, "whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world", and "the victory" is "faith". The Christian *chooses* to obey the will of Christ, and there is no power in the universe that is able to prevent his doing



so, for the Christ is Master of all. Herein lies the secret and triumph of the Christian Martyr. There is absolutely *no* power that can constrain the Christian to act against his will and in opposition to his choice. Whenever the forces of evil array themselves in their strength, and the decisive test comes, the Christian may be known by his assertion of this soul-liberty, this choice of the Christ, unrestrainable and unrestrained even by death itself. But this mastery is made known not only in the exercise of choice in the face of opposition but in the triumph of ultimate success. That which is born of God (4) *overcomes* (*νικᾷ*, a strong word): that is the Christian accomplishes that which God's purpose has ordained in him and for him and that which he is led to undertake in Christ, in spite of the world and the flesh and the devil. Whom God has chosen for eternal life, that one *will* "work out his own salvation with fear and trembling". Whom God has ordained for service, whether the task is for head, or hands, or heart; whether it is active or passive—to press forward, or to suffer and wait; to build the superstructure or to lay the foundation; to plough or to plant or to reap; to teach or to preach or to provide—that one overcomes because God overcomes in him and through him; and the overcoming is evidence of that which was born of God.

12TH TEST. CONSCIOUSNESS. V:10.

There is one more test here (V:10), the twelfth and last in the list. This is Consciousness. "He that believeth hath the witness in himself." There is no higher evidence than that of consciousness, for there is nothing that can contradict it, and it appeals to nothing to sustain it. I love and choose and will. I am conscious of so doing, and argument cannot convince me to the contrary. The Christian knows that he loves the Lord Jesus; knows that he chooses Christ as Savior; knows that he wills to persist in and abide by this choice just as he knows that he exists—by mere consciousness. The spiritual

identity is as emphatic and as clearly defined as the physical. Nay—the weakest and most timid; that one who hesitates and falters when called upon to assert Christ's acceptance of him; that one who shrinks from being exposed to any test whatever—that one is yet conscious of choosing the Crucified, of choosing Him in spite of opposition, and of rejoicing in the exercise of his will in his choice. And the awful alternative is to have given God the lie!

RECAPITULATION. V:11-15.

Chapter V of the epistle comprises verses 11-15 inclusive of the arbitrary fifth chapter, and is a Recapitulation. "This," clearly meaning the wonderful chain that has been given to us link by link, Light, Life, Love, and Liberty, is the "record," *ἡ μαρτυρία*, the testimony. The substance of it all is that God has given us eternal life in His Son, Jesus Christ.

THE RECORD. V:11, 12.

Having Him (12) is having what God gives, and also having the manifestation of Himself in this life that proves inheritance in life eternal. Not having the Son is having no claim to eternal life. There is no middle ground.

THE CONFIDENCE. V:13-15.

Logically resting upon this is the "confidence" (or assurance, *ἡπαρησία*) that is the Christian's privilege—13:15. Having Christ, that which the Christ desires in him and for him he may boldly ask for in His Name, from his own resurrection in a glorified body down to the minutest detail of a life that is to be "perfected" because it concerns the Christ by right of His ownership thereof. The request that the Christ-life prompts, (by the Christ-life is meant the indwelling Christ "the hope of glory", Col. I:27), is always heard, and is always answered in accordance with His will, because the Father refuses nothing to the Son.

## CONCLUSION. V:16-21.

The last six verses of this chapter (V) constitute John's chapter VI which is his Conclusion. Suggested by the thought last discussed, there is a reminder of the privilege of prayer, not only for one's self but for others—save for the unpardonable sin. This, in the very nature of the case, the Christian cannot commit; and it is reasonable to conclude that neither have those committed it who are yet being wooed by the Holy Spirit. Is not this an argument to plead, that an acceptance of the Anointed Savior may render its commission forever impossible? It is wonderful, in reading verses 18-20, to note with what clear, decided emphasis the disciple "whom Jesus loved" uses the confident words—"We know"—neither is it less wonderful to note the profound importance and the eternal value of that which he declares to be known. This is the clarion note that closes this beautiful and loving "First Epistle of John", sounding, in the full assurance of faith, the triumphant declaration of the truth of God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ. "This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols."