



1 John Chapter Four

III. 1 John 3:11-4:6 - Overcoming Evil by Listening to the Apostle (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Four

In the opening section of this chapter, John calls on his readers to show spiritual discernment when listening to those who come to teach them or communicate their ideas to them, because he knows that false prophets are among them. The key test is that anyone who proclaims the truth as given to them in the Gospel is of God. Anyone who denies the Gospel is not of God, but of the world, and he has the spirit of the antichrist. John concludes that: <<*this is how we recognise the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood*>> (v.6).

John's next assertion of how to tell who believers are is a test of love. Since God is love, he proved his love for his creation by sending his Son as a sacrificial offering of atonement for their sin, for all who would turn back to God through him; those that respond in that way can then be identified in that they too love God and their fellow believers.

John proclaims that God has given all true believers the Holy Spirit to indwell them. He also reminds them of his own eyewitness account of Christ's coming and sacrificial death. The theme continues that those who display love are of God but that those who do not have this love are not of God and remain in darkness and are fearful. Those in Christ will need to fear nothing on the Day of Judgement that will come upon the whole world.

III.b 1 John 4:1-6 - Test the Spirits

At the time of writing this letter, churches were mainly small house groups who would have relatively limited access to the key church figures like John. The receipt of teaching from letters like this one was vital and a source of huge encouragement, as was the testimony of the brothers who would visit and bring the letters. The problem was there were many itinerants travelling around

claiming all sorts of truths, sometimes just looking for somewhere to stay but at other times looking for a place to disrupt or even rule.

It is not only Cain's bad precedent of lack of love that John fears for his readers; it is also the forces of both human and spiritual deception. John furnishes a litmus test to detect them.

¹ Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

1 John 4:1

Do not believe every spirit. Christian faith is not spiritual or even human gullibility. Churches are to be accepting and welcoming of all newcomers but it is important to determine who they are before trusting in what they say!

Test the spirits. The unseen spiritual influences that guide people's speech and actions can be tested by observing their doctrine and conduct as well as by the gift of spiritual discernment: <<*To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues*>> (1 Corinthians 12:8-10), and: <<*Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said*>> (1 Corinthians 14:29).

Whether they are from God. Two key tests are to discern what they say or teach, and to observe who it is that listens and accepts them. The key issue then becomes when false teachers or spirits are detected, what should be done?

False prophets are people who claim to speak for God but are actually speaking either from human intent or by demonic influence (vv.3-4), both of which John would consider to be of the spirit of antichrist. This would have been familiar to men like John for it was written in their Scriptures from long ago: <<*The days of punishment are coming, the days of reckoning are at hand. Let Israel know this. Because your sins are so many and your hostility so great, the prophet is considered a fool, the inspired man a maniac*>> (Hosea 9:7), <<*The visions of your prophets were false and worthless; they did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity. The oracles they gave you were false and misleading*>> (Lamentations 2:14), <<*And if the prophet is enticed to utter a prophecy, I the Lord have enticed that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him and destroy him from among my people Israel. They will bear their guilt – the prophet will be as guilty as the one who consults him*>> (Ezekiel 14:9-10).

Jesus had warned of false prophets and what they would do to his church: <<*At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect – if that were possible*>> (Matthew 24:23-24).

John is not using the term false prophet in the same way that Paul would use the positive alternative as a spiritual gift for the church. Instead, he uses it to describe anyone who has gone out from the church in order to proclaim misleading falsehoods, with the intention to deceive or disrupt churches.

In the NT era it was common for men to travel around practising spiritual divination for financial gain. Luke records a quite comical account of such men: <<*Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding*>> (Acts 19:13-16), and Paul rescued a demon-possessed slave girl who was being used by her owners for similar divination in Philippi: <<*Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her*>> (Acts 16:16-18), and while Peter and John were supporting the work of Philip in Samaria, the magician called Simon wanted to buy the spiritual gifts from them: <<*When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin"*>> (Acts 8:18-23). These accounts all demonstrate that both the Divine Spirit and the spirit of antichrist can be discerned by those in the church.

In today's age of tolerance, discriminating discernment can be viewed as being judgmental, which is taught against by Jesus: <<*Do not judge, or you too will be judged*>> (Matthew 7:1). Yet Jesus also taught: <<*Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment*>> (John 7:24). What Jesus requires of a believer is not that they should make judgements about people but that they should show good judgement when discerning what is right or wrong, good or evil!

² This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,

1 John 4:2

This is how you can recognise. John establishes a doctrinal standard, specifically a Christological one, for testing spirits. If a spirit, or a person moved to speak by such a spirit, does not acknowledge or confess that Jesus Christ has come in the

flesh, that spirit or person is misleading God's people. Apparently such false teachers were saying that Jesus only *appeared* to be human. This was probably based on a false idea that the material creation was inherently evil and therefore physical bodies were evil. Others may have claimed that Jesus was an inspired rabbi from Nazareth, thereby dismissing his deity. To dismiss any aspect of Jesus being both fully God and fully human brings the whole understanding of Jesus into doubt and even disrepute. What John would also be concerned about is that some people could then be drawn out of the light of salvation that Christ had won for them, back into the darkness from where they came before they knew Christ.

The test John is indicating appears to be quite simple in discerning whether the speaker is teaching the truth of Christ or not. However, it is a matter of extreme importance for in the balance hang truth and error about the first commandment and the ultimate question of faith: knowledge and worship of the one true God. For denial of Jesus would be tantamount to worshipping a false god, since only through Christ is knowledge of the true God mediated, therefore John warns: <<*Dear children, keep yourselves from idols*>> (1 John 5:21). However, these people are unlikely to be blatantly rejecting Jesus but would use cunning deception to alter the truth with subtlety.

³ but every spirit that 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.

1 John 4:3

Every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus. That is, whoever refuses to acknowledge that Jesus is God the Son, who <<*has come in the flesh*>> (v.2). Anyone can talk about Jesus and even believe that he lived on earth, as other religions, cults, and philosophies often accept. But unless such people affirm both the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus, they are not truly acknowledging Jesus, but, as John states in unequivocal terms, they are under the influence of the spirit of the antichrist.

It is also important to note that, by omitting that he had come in the flesh in this verse, is to turn the focus that they are to believe in Christ as the person, i.e. both Jesus the man and Christ the Son of God, and not to focus on merely believing in the doctrine, for it is Christ Jesus alone who offers salvation.

Which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. As with the writing of Paul on the man of lawlessness, John provides an image of both the ultimate deceiver who will appear in person at the appropriate time and also acknowledges that there are those acting as his agents, who are already operating in and around the churches, and will do so throughout church history.

⁴ You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

1 John 4:4

Have overcome them. Overcome is the Greek word *nikao*, which implies an active conflict in which one side emerges victorious over the other. However, the victory was not through any ability of their own but by the power of God through his Spirit in the believers. That is how God operates through people, for example: <<***The Lord gave David victory wherever he went***>> (2 Samuel 8:6b and 8:14b).

Those whom John refers to in this passage who have been **overcome** are those **in the world** who are mainly opposed to God, but it can also apply to those who are apathetic toward God or even ignorant of him.

The one who is in you is the third person of the Trinitarian Godhead - the Holy Spirit. Because of his power, the true believer has nothing to fear from the seducers of the world providing they allow the Spirit to guide them.

The one who is in the world refers to Satan and, by implication, his demons: <<***We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one***>> (1 John 5:19). Jesus referred to him as the prince but indicates that true disciples have nothing to fear, for those who are of God will be drawn to Christ: <<***Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself***>> (John 12:31-32).

1 John 4:5-6

John expands on his second test to discern the spirit of the speaker. Is his message being received by those of God or by those in the world? These two verses echo the sentiments of Jesus that John expresses also in his Gospel: <<***If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates me hates my Father as well***>> (John 15:18-23), which clearly shows that each side accepts those from their own nature.

⁵ They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.

1 John 4:5

They are from the world, the world listens to them. Jesus himself did not convince most leaders of his time: <<***Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him?***>> (John 7:48), and: <<***You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One***>> (Acts 4:25-26). This was partly due to their fear and partly due to their love of worldly status:

<<Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God. Then Jesus cried out, “When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me”>> (John 12:42-44). Even the common people who followed him were often fickle: <<On hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.” From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him>> (John 6:60-66). Yet not everyone will depart from Christ for there are many who realise there is nowhere else to turn: <<“You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God”>> (John 6:67-69).

Speak from the viewpoint of the world. Their speech originates from and is empowered by the world’s perspective and values. Those of the world include those who actively oppose Christ, including the atheist movement, who do so under the spirit of antichrist, and those who simply are ignorant of Christ, or have simply chosen to ignore him.

Listens to them implies more than just giving them a polite hearing but that they will then accept what is being said and act positively to that message. That is what is of so much concern to John and would be to any church leader, for it is all too easy to lead the gullible and the kind-hearted away with a deceitful message.

⁶ We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognise the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

1 John 4:6

The two groups can be differentiated, both by spiritual discernment, and by studying closely the doctrine they proclaim in their speech or by their actions of love for one another.

Whoever knows God listens to us. Disciples of Christ should immediately be able to discern those who are other Christians by what they say; then they can accept their message as being of divine inspiration and not deception or delusion. What they say should always concur with the Gospel message of Christ’s coming in the flesh from God to undertake all the work the Father had given him to do.

Does not listen to us. People who are not true believers resist sound doctrine. It does not make sense to them and does not fit their man-centred, materialistic system of thought, nor can it for they have rejected the gift of the Holy Spirit that

Jesus had promised to those who will believe in and follow him: <<*The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned*>> (1 Corinthians 2:14).

In each group there are people who reject the message; by doing so they reject the messenger. Christians are right to reject both. Those of the world need to know they are ultimately rejecting God, as God once informed Samuel: <<*And the Lord told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king*>> (1 Samuel 8:7).

What John is showing here is still very relevant to the church in the 21st Century as well. Discerning spirits is not just the responsibility of individuals with such gifts of discernment; it is for the whole church as a community. The church needs to make sure that their own leadership are drawn from men and women who are called to interpret and teach the Word of God faithfully and fully. The whole church community is also to agree on what is central to the Christian faith and then ensure that they do all they can as a community to live the life that reflects true Christianity.

Also, the church must be wary not to try to discern every individual's claims or points of view, which they may make. Not all disciples of Christ need to hold exactly the same viewpoints. They are not necessarily false prophets because they say something that is different to others. There are some aspects of the bible where it is OK to hold differing interpretations, such as those surrounding end-times theology, where one person may be a premillennialist and while another may be amillennialist, for example. Some may say that Jesus was 30 years old when he started his earthly ministry and some that he was slightly older. There are those who believe that parables are true stories and others that they are fictitious but make a point that needs to be taught. These are issues that can be held differently without detracting from the central message of Christ as both fully God and fully man, who came to earth to undertake the Father's will in his substitutionary death for the sins of all mankind, who was subsequently raised to life and continues to live today, in heaven with the Father, preparing for the day when he will return to claim his inheritance. This was witnessed by Daniel in a vision: <<*I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed*>> (Daniel 7:13-14).

In summary, two extremes are to be avoided. On the one hand, the church ought not rush into judgment on others who hold a different viewpoint. On the other hand, the church cannot avoid its duty to teach and nurture people in the Christian faith. And to do so responsibly it must, in every age and generation, test the spirits, that is, approve and cherish that which is true because it comes from God's own Spirit of truth, while resisting that which is opposed to God. The church must do all it can to bring back those into the

church who have wandered off and to tell the Gospel truth to all others in the world in the hope they will eventually accept it.

IV. 1 John 4:7-21 - God's Love and Ours

John's teaching in these verses bears comparison with that of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians Chapter 13. <<*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love*>>. Love is the bond that will see unity in the church; unity with Christ and unity between believers.

IV.a. 1 John 4:7-12 - The Perfecting of God's Love

God's life-giving love is the theme of this passage. As John develops this theme, he makes three important points:

1. God is the source of all love (vv.7-8).
2. God models what genuine love is (vv.9-10).
3. God commands believers to love each other (vv.11-12).

John moves from the assertion that God is love to the command that believers are to love each other. Indeed, the whole point of the passage is to trace the relationship between God's love and human love, and to show how human love flows from God's own love.

The closing words of this section, <<*his love is made complete in us*>> (v.12), translated as perfected in some versions of the Bible, capture the direction of John's claims and exhortation, that the Spirit of God is the Spirit of Love.

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

1 John 4:7

Let us love one another. By continuing to write in the first person, John is leading the way by offering his own love for them as a guideline or example to follow. This

follows on to the command that was based on Jesus' personal love for others, that he demonstrated in his compassion for so many that he met.

What should also be noticed from Jesus' character is that he was no soft touch and would speak forcefully against all those who opposed his message of love for the Father and doing his will. Disciples of Christ must avoid becoming weak and wet in the world's eyes, for that is how so many are seen!

Love comes from God. This simple statement informs the readers of the origins of true love but it will soon be overshadowed in v.8, where John asserts that: <<**God is love**>>, that is, it characterises him and he characterises love. Given then that God is the source of love then it can be seen how it then flows from God to a believer and from that believer out to others. It builds up an image of a number of electrical circuits being connected and switched on with God being the generating source of all love.

Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. This does not rule out the need for faithful confession of Christ: <<**That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved**>> (Romans 10:9), and: <<**No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also**>> (1 John 2:23), and ethical integrity: <<**Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends**>> (John 15:13), and: <<**This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers**>> (1 John 3:16). For love completes the picture of a life in fellowship with God; and love is presented here as a consequence of, not a precondition for, being born of God. Unbelievers can love others to some degree, but not in the way that God's indwelling presence enables Christians to love both God and others (vv.8-11).

⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

1 John 4:8

Does not know God, because God is love. The person who lacks love shows himself to be unchanged at the core of his being by the Gospel message. John is not saying that God is only love, for he has numerous other attributes, nor that love is God - a statement for which there is no scriptural support. As Frederick Buechner, US Presbyterian minister and theologian, comments, "To say that love is God is romantic idealism. To say that God is love is either the last straw or the ultimate truth". For John, it is indeed the ultimate truth. God is not hate, anger, bitterness or deceit, but love. Love does not describe the fullness of God, but God defines the fullness of love.

God is love is the very essence of God's nature and means that God continually gives of himself to others and seeks their benefit. There is eternal love between the persons of the Trinity, the only perfect relational community in existence, and was so even before the world was created: <<**Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world**>> (John

17:24), and God's love is the ultimate source of any love that Christians are able to display, (v.11, v.12, and v.19).

Using the imagery of an electric circuit then if the love is not flowing from one person to another believer it is because the first person is not connected to the power supply, i.e. he does not know God.

⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

1 John 4:9

That God showed his love is not an abstract principle or sentiment, for it was made manifest when he sent his one only Son into the world: <<*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*>> (Romans 5:8), so that sinful humanity might live, i.e. be restored from their inherent spiritual death to receive eternal life in the presence of God the Father, rather than eternal life excluded from God: <<*where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*>> (Matthew 25:30b). Thus God set up a model for others to copy, i.e. by accepting his love through the gift of his Son and reflecting that love outwards to all others, God, brother, neighbour and enemy alike.

One and only Son, also translated as only begotten Son, indicates that he is not a created being, for God has many children as has been noted throughout this letter. If Christ were simply a remarkable human with God's spiritual anointing then John would not have referred to him as the one and only Son, for he would be just one of many sons.

¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

1 John 4:10

Not that we loved God. God's love sets the standard for the love Christians are called to embody. It is of course, a fact that ever since creation there have been people who have indeed loved God although there is no comparison to the amazing love which God shows for his creation and that is so deeply embedded in the very essence of God, for God's love is a life-giving source.

He loved us and sent his Son. John confirms this in his Gospel account with the very well known and frequently quoted Scripture: <<*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*>> (John 3:16), where John again refers to Jesus as God's: <<*one and only Son*>> (v.9).

When reading passages like this we need to reflect just what it was that Jesus was sent to. He came down from the glory of heaven to earth, where he was rejected by most of the people that he had created. They abused him, beat him, flogged him, pierced his side and his soul, crucified then buried him. At the same time he bore the crushing weight of the world's sin and God's wrath in his body as he hung on the Cross, becoming the curse of God. Even then, his first thought was for others for we know that: <<*Jesus said, "Father, forgive*

them, for they do not know what they are doing”>> (Luke 23:34a). This would be enough for most people to be drawn to the man, but he was then raised from the dead and now loves his people so much that he is prepared to sit at the right hand of the Father in order to intercede for those very people who treated him so badly, as well as for those who simply continue to ignore him and what he has achieved. That is love and devotion, which is the very essence of the only true living God.

Atoning sacrifice or propitiation. As stated in comments on 1 John 2:2, but worth emphasising again, is that it is propitiation and not expiation, for Christ’s atoning work not only wiped away the sin of mankind but turned God’s righteous anger away from sinners, for Jesus bore them all in his own body on behalf of everyone else. Sin brings divine and just wrath. On the Cross, Jesus bore that wrath for the sins of all mankind, opening up the way for those who were called to accept the free and gracious offer to return to the Father through the Son: <<**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God**>> (2 Corinthians 5:21).

¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

1 John 4:11

Here, in v.1 and in v.7 John uses a strong term of endearment, dear friends or beloved, Greek agapētoi, evidence that he himself has been mastered by the love he calls for. He uses the same word also at 1 John 2:7, 3:2, and 3:21.

We also ought to love one another. To be imitators of Christ, John’s words form an invincible argument. If a person claims to love God, and it is known that God loves those who follow Christ, then it naturally follows that believers ought to love one other. Since God is love then demonstrating such divine love for a brother or sister provides evidence of the Holy Spirit indwelling a believer’s heart.

The ought to love here is not so much a command to be obeyed, for such commands can at times lead to discouragement or indifference. Instead, because a believer is connected to the source of love through their relationship with God then they have a desire to see that love flow outwards to others. This brings the ought to love into a different perspective. It is now a command that is received with hope and joy.

¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

1 John 4:12

No one has ever seen God. John makes the same observation in his Gospel: <<**No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known**>> (John 1:18).

No one has ever seen God, that is, in a full and complete way, as Jesus confirms: <<**No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father**>> (John 6:46), but some people did see partial revelations of God

in the OT. To see God in Christ would be far better, something that the apostle Philip had not initially grasped: <<*Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work*>> (John 14:8-10).

Again, the Lord's command is to love one another: <<"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another">> (John 13:34-35). Paul sees this as a debt: <<*Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law*>> (Romans 13:8).

So strong is John's confidence that the Christian community will fulfil this command that he writes that mutual Christian love manifests the presence and action of the invisible God. When he writes no one has ever seen God, he calls to mind the same statement in his Gospel, as recently noted but worth repeating: <<*No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known*>> (John 1:18). In both cases, he is not trying to tell his readers what God is like but how God is known. And God is known not only in the revelation that comes to them in Jesus, but also by the manifestation of their love for each other. The love of believers makes evident and concrete the activity of God among them. In fact, when John writes that this is how God's love is made complete, he means that it reaches its intended goal when it flows from God, through believers to their fellow believers. The love with which God loves His children must in turn be extended to the fellowship of believers, i.e. the church.

His love is made complete in us. John repeats an earlier statement for emphasis due to the importance of what he is trying to get his readers to grasp: <<*But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him*>> (1 John 2:5). Repetition is no bad thing as we have noted before. The completeness is also translated as being made perfect, showing that it cannot be ineffectual or fruitless love; such love will manifest an outworking of that love for God and for other people.

IV.b 1 John 4:13-21 - The Assurance of God's Spirit

God's Spirit (v.13) gives impetus for and assurance in the high calling of mutual love. Love is demonstrated by God in the sending of his Son and giving assurance to all who believe in him to stand in confidence when Jesus does return.

¹³ We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

1 John 4:13

The presence and activity of the Holy Spirit within Christians are evidence that they are abiding in God. A believer then needs to open their heart to the Spirit's leading and allow him to work with their own spirit that was given to them by God

from the time of creation: <<*For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline*>> (2 Timothy 1:7). Thus when a person's spirit works with God's Holy Spirit, that person will start to realise their full potential in God.

¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world.

1 John 4:14

We have seen and testify. This was particularly and uniquely true for apostles like John, who were Jesus' hand-picked witnesses. By extension and through faith, all subsequent believers testify to the same truths. The authenticity of what they had seen, heard and touched compelled them to share it with others, even if it meant their own suffering and death: <<*But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."* After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened>> (Acts 4:19-21).

Others too testify to what they see and hear of God: <<*My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you*>> (Job 42:5), <<*As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord Almighty, in the city of our God: God makes her secure forever*>> (Psalm 48:8). Believers today can claim to have seen God through Jesus as it comes with the 'sight of faith'. There is an African proverb which states 'God has no grandchildren' for all come to him in the same way, whether they physically saw him or experience him through their faith relationship.

Sent his Son. This is not just any son but the Son of the Father, the one and only Son, the only begotten of God who, through his relationship and intention towards his disciples, is the Saviour of the world; he saves believers by his death, example, intercession, Spirit, and power against the enemies of that salvation.

Saviour occurs in John's writings only here and in John 4:42 after Jesus had spent a couple of days with a group of Samaritans: <<*They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world"*>>.

¹⁵ If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.

1 John 4:15

Jesus is the Son of God, not in the derived sense that all Christians, as God's children, are his adopted sons and heirs: <<*For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God*>> (Romans 8:14), and: <<*You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus*>> (Galatians 3:26), but in a unique sense, the Son of God, in which Jesus is acknowledged as personally divine and as sharing fully every attribute of God. In

v.2 it was required that true teachers affirm Christ's full humanity; here it is required that they affirm his full deity.

Paul once wrote: <<*Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit*>> (1 Corinthians 12:3), showing that he and John had a very similar understanding of how God's Spirit impacts a believer.

^{16a} And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

1 John 4:16a

We know and rely on. Assurance of salvation, while never an arrogant presumption, can become a settled state of mind and heart, for: <<*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation*>> (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

Rely on suggests the trustworthy nature of that in which believers put their trust. Christians can count on the steadfastness of God's love, because they have experienced it in God's faithfulness to them, i.e. they can rely on God.

^{16b} God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

1 John 4:16b

God is love. John boldly reasserts his claim from v.8. Love is a key attribute in the very essence and nature of God but it is far from being the only or even most prominent attribute. However, it is highly significant for there is no one outside of the scope of God's love, even his fiercest opponent can still turn back to him through Christ and will benefit from his love.

God is love is a statement that is difficult to improve upon, explain or paraphrase. One can say that God's nature is love, that God's actions are loving, that God repeatedly demonstrates love for all people, that God loved even a hostile world and that God sent Jesus to make all of this known to the whole world. That God's love provides the standard for love means that authentic love is steadfast and constant, that it is directed toward others with life-giving healing, that it seeks out its enemies for good and that it is known pre-eminently in the Cross. Human love derives its character and shape from the standard of divine love.

Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. Had John concluded that love is God then this passage would be open to serious misinterpretation, but since he has stated twice that God is love then it speaks volumes, i.e. it speaks of love in its pure sense as gives evidence of a mutually inclusive relationship. If a person truly accepts the love of God and the gift of the Holy Spirit to indwell them, that love will then radiate out from that person, demonstrating that God is in that person and therefore they are in God.

This verse unveils one of the many mysteries of God: <<Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?” “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen>> (Romans 11:33-36).

¹⁷ In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him.

1 John 4:17

In this way refers to the previous verse, where John speaks of believers abiding in God and God abiding in them.

Made complete among us. Complete and perfect love can be seen within the perfect community, which is the triune Godhead. This analogy can then be taken wider. In the words of CH Dodd, the 20th Century scholar and theologian, “The energy of love discharges itself along lines which form a triangle, whose points are God, self, and neighbour”. Where, if any one leg of the triangle is missing, love remains incomplete and immature. But where the triangle is whole, love is complete.

Confidence on the Day of Judgment. Either eternal life or eternal punishment awaits all humanity: <<**Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him**>> (John 3:36), and God’s love furnishes a sure hope for those who have trusted in him. We can be sure of this through the Word of God, which also shows that it is a two-way street with commitment on both sides: <<**Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself**>> (2 Timothy 2:11-13). The ultimate reward is not just eternal life but eternal fellowship in the presence of God the Father.

Because in this world we are like him. Just as the Son was and is present in the world in a loving fashion that in no way attracted divine displeasure, so are the Son’s followers. The love that Christ embodied and lived out among believers is their confidence in the Day of Judgment. Also, the Son has free access to and confidence with the Father, which he passes on to those who have faith in him so that they can approach the Father in all boldness and confidence: <<**In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete**>> (John 16:23-24).

¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

1 John 4:18

No fear in love does and should not rule out the presence and constructive effect of: <<*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge*>> (Proverbs 1:7a). Here John speaks of fear of final judgment (v.17). God's perfect love for believers drives out the fear of wrath and eternal punishment.

There are things in the world to be feared, especially reverential fear of God that is a positive emotion, and things that a believer is commanded not to fear: <<*But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him*>> (Luke 12:5), for: <<*His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation*>> (Luke 1:50), and Peter writes: <<*Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king*>> (1 Peter 2:17). John will later record what the angel cried out: <<*He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water"*>> (Revelation 14:7), but the overall command from God to all believers is not to fear or worry: <<*"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own*>> (Matthew 6:25-34). Fear and worry are natural human emotions and most people do so. However, unnecessary and continual fear and worry are an indication of lack of trust in God.

Many Christians are tortured by feelings of worthlessness, self-doubt and inadequacy; they may feel they are not good enough for God, that somehow by trying harder they really can make God love them more. But they have nothing to fear or worry about whether their faith in Christ is genuine and from the heart. To know that they are forgiven for their sin, loved in their weakness, saved by his mercy, destined for fellowship with God, all because they are supremely valued by God; that is to know the perfect love that drives away fear. It is not because of what they have done that they can have such confidence before God, but because of what God has done for them and indeed for the whole world, if only they would turn to him, but it seems that: <<*In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly*

hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them'>> (Matthew 13:14-15).

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.

1 John 4:19

We love because. Christian love is a gift from God, demonstrated supremely through the Cross: <<*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*>> (Romans 5:8). God's love always takes the initiative, and the love of Christians is a response to that love. Likewise, all morally good human actions are good, not because they conform to some arbitrary human standard of good, but because they are rooted in imitation of the morally perfect character of God and conform to God's commands. After all, humans are made in the image of God: <<*Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them*>> (Genesis 1:26-27).

He first loved us. God has always shown love for his people: <<*Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness*>> (1 Kings 10:9), and therefore the recipients should: <<*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever*>> (1 Chronicles 16:34).

²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

1 John 4:20

He is a liar. It is quite clear from the letter so far that it is impossible to be a true believer in God and yet not love someone whom God loves. The two things are mutually exclusive and the person that John labels a liar is at best deluded concerning his faith in Christ and needs to come back before God in sincere repentance and with an open heart to receive God's love and forgiveness. Then he will be in a place to truly love his brother.

A man who does love God, whom he has not seen is blessed: <<*Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"*>> (John 20:29), but the blessing will be non-existent if that love for God is false.

²¹ And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

1 John 4:21

Whoever loves God must also love his brother. It is not possible to separate the two, for it becomes a natural obligation of the heart and mind. King Solomon proclaims that: <<*A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity*>> (Proverbs 17:17). King David demonstrated how love for a brother could be in his relationship with King Saul's son Jonathan. Their friendship endured the wrath of Saul until the end when Jonathan died in battle: <<*How the mighty have fallen in battle! Jonathan lies slain on your heights. I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women*>> (2 Samuel 1:25-26). Both of them were men of God and showed how love in fellowship could be.