

# UNIT 1—The Word of Life / 1 John 1:1–4

## Scripture

### The Word of Life

**1** *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. <sup>2</sup>The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. <sup>3</sup>We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>We write this to make our<sup>a</sup> joy complete.*

## Group Questions

Every group meeting has three goals: (1) **To Begin** (15 minutes) to break the ice; (2) **Read Scripture and Discuss** (30 Minutes); and (3) **To Close and Pray** (15–30 Minutes). Try to keep on schedule. The most important time is the prayer time.

### TO BEGIN / 15 Minutes (Choose 1 or 2)

- Where were you living when you were 7 years old?
- What was your house like at age 7? What do you remember about your room?
- Who was a very special person in your life then?

### READ SCRIPTURE AND DISCUSS / 30 Minutes

- When have you been part of a group where you enjoyed true fellowship—where there was mutual love and understanding?
- John makes a point of saying that he has heard, seen and touched Jesus. What were your “beginnings” with Jesus like? In what ways have you “seen”, “heard” and “touched” him?
- There was a serious problem in John’s church: a group had split off and were teaching that Jesus did not really die. They also believed they were without sin. What could not be proclaimed if Jesus hadn’t died (v. 2)? Have you ever come close to losing your faith in Christ? What happened?
- What emotion will John experience when he makes clear the truth of Jesus (v. 4)?
- Who has been like the apostle John in your life—a person who has convinced you of Jesus’ love and cared about your spiritual growth?
- Why did you decide to join this Bible study group? What are you hoping to get out of this group?

### TO CLOSE AND PRAY / 15–30 Minutes

- What “season” are you experiencing in your spiritual life right now? Spring—life is beginning to bud? Winter—the days have been cold and dark? Fall—some days beautiful, some with a chill in the air?
- What would you like this group to discuss about the coming weeks together (consider study, prayer, shared leadership, outreach, confidentiality, accountability, etc.)? In order to get the most out of 1 John, what will you put into it?
- Who do you know who might like to join this group next week?
- How would you like this group to pray for you in the coming week?

<sup>a</sup>4 Some manuscripts your

## Notes

**1:1–4** John begins his letter with a prologue that is reminiscent of the prologue to his Gospel (John 1:1–18). Both prologues focus on the pre-existent Word of God who has been revealed to humanity. But there are also differences between the two. In the Gospel prologue, the emphasis is on the divine nature of the Word. In this prologue, the emphasis is on the *physical manifestation* of the Word of God. This difference is due to the difference in audiences. In his Gospel, John wrote to Jews who did not believe that God could reveal himself in the person of Jesus. But here, the secessionists presuppose that Jesus is the Son of God. Their problem is that they neglect his human side. This is why John emphasizes the fact that the pre-existent Word has been experienced by auditory, visual, and manual means. Although this prologue is only four verses long, it is a complex piece of writing. In Greek, this is a single sentence which is, according to one scholar, a “grammatical tangle” (Dodd). The structure has a distinct purpose—John focuses attention on the object which is proclaimed (Jesus Christ), rather than on the act of proclamation itself.

**1:1** Although this document lacks the usual identification of sender and recipient (as well as the normal greeting and prayer), it is clear that this is not an anonymous tract written to a general audience. Scattered throughout the letter are abundant personal comments and specific references (e.g., 2:19). **which.** John begins with four clauses, each introduced by “which.” The first clause describes who the “Word of life” is. The next three describe how he was experienced. **from the beginning.** The initial clause makes the astonishing assertion that this “Word of life” was pre-existent (see John 1:1). Since only divine beings preexisted, John affirms Jesus’ deity. **heard/seen/touched.** However, John’s emphasis is on the human nature of Jesus. The next three clauses describe how his physical presence was experienced. Notice the progression: in the OT, men and women had *heard* God on many occasions; occasionally they had *seen* some aspect of God (see Ex. 3:1–6; 33:18–23); but no one had ever *touched* God. This was the final proof that the Word of life had indeed been “made flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14, KJV). In Greek courts, the testimony of two senses was required in order to verify that something occurred (Brown). John offers evidence from a third sense as well. **touched.** This word means literally “to feel after” or “to grope,” as a blind person might do. It also means “to examine closely” (Brooke). **Word of**

**life.** The message preached by the apostles and by Jesus himself concerned eternal life (i.e., spiritual life). This is one sense of the phrase “Word of life.” But Jesus not only preached this message. He *was* the message. This is the second sense of the phrase (see John 1:4; 11:25–26; 14:6).

**1:2** This is a parenthesis in which John declares in unequivocal terms that *Jesus* is the Word he is talking about. **we.** The author is among those who knew Jesus personally. **testify.** This is a legal term describing what an eyewitness does while in court. Such a person makes a public declaration of what he or she has experienced firsthand. **the eternal life.** John focuses on what is so significant about Jesus: he is Life itself. God’s very life has appeared in the historical person of Jesus (see John 1:2).

**1:3 we proclaim.** This is the main verb of the opening sentence. It clarifies the intention of the prologue. John’s aim is to identify the nature of the apostolic proclamation, which is that Jesus is the incarnate God. **fellowship.** This word means literally, in Greek, “having in common.” It has the dual sense of *participation together* in shared activity or outlook, and *union together* because of this shared experience. John’s purpose is to bring others into participation and union with him and his colleagues, and thus into participation and union with the Father and the Son. **with the Father and with his Son.** Apparently the false teachers were saying that it was possible to have fellowship with God apart from Christ. John’s point is that fellowship with God is possible only through Jesus (2:23), because in him eternal life (i.e., God’s life) is manifested.

**1:4** John identifies his second reason for writing. He wants his own joy to be completed. **joy.** This is the profound gladness or satisfaction that comes when one participates in the life of God. It is an important term for John. In this epistle he indicates that the joy which began with the experience of the resurrected Lord is brought to completion via the experience of this full-orbed fellowship between Father, Son, and the children of God. **complete.** Full, lacking nothing.



# UNIT 2—Walking in the Light / 1 John 1:5–2:14

## Scripture

### Walking in the Light

<sup>5</sup> *This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup>If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. <sup>7</sup>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, purifies us from all<sup>a</sup> sin.*

<sup>8</sup>*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup>If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup>If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.*

**2** *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. <sup>2</sup>He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for<sup>b</sup> the sins of the whole world.*

<sup>3</sup>*We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. <sup>4</sup>The man who says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. <sup>5</sup>But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love<sup>c</sup> is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: <sup>6</sup>Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. <sup>7</sup>Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. <sup>8</sup>Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.*

## Group Questions

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### TO BEGIN / 15 Minutes (Choose 1 or 2)

- As a child, were you afraid of the dark? What “monsters” were in the dark that scared you?
- What game did you play as a child where you were blindfolded? What was the experience like?
- Growing up, who was the “realist” in your life—one who helped you understand “the way life really is”?

### READ SCRIPTURE AND DISCUSS / 30 Minutes

- What characteristics of light reflect who God is? Has God brought light to your life? In what way? Or do you more often feel like you’re “in the dark”?
- What false claims do John’s opponents make (vv. 1:6,8)? How do you feel about the consistency of your own life? Do you feel more as if you’re living the truth or living a lie? Why?
- What hope does John give when people fail to live in light of God’s love (1:9; 2:1–2)?
- When you know you’ve sinned, how long does it take for you to confess? What is God’s part and what is your part in the confession process?
- How can the command to love God and others (v. 2:7) be new and old at the same time? How is its truth seen in Jesus (think of examples from the Gospels)? Whom have you known as someone who models this behavior?
- What, then, are the two tests given in this passage for determining whether one really knows God (vv. 2:3,10)? How are you doing in each of these areas?
- What three things does John stress again in verses 2:12–13? Which one of these do you most need to hear this week?

[Scripture and questions continued on page 14]

<sup>a</sup>7 Or every    <sup>b</sup>2 Or He is the one who turns aside God’s wrath, taking away our sins, and not only ours but also    <sup>c</sup>5 Or word, love for God

## Notes

**1:5–2:2** John examines the barrier that prevents such fellowship (i.e., sin) and how to deal with it.

**1:5 *God is light.*** John's second great assertion about God (the first being that *God had come in the flesh*—vv. 1–3). In the Bible, “light” was connected on the intellectual level with truth, and on the moral level with purity.

**1:6 *If we claim.*** The first of three false claims that John will refute. He will measure the validity of each against the apostolic proclamation that God is light and in him is no darkness. ***to have fellowship ... yet walk in the darkness.*** It is claimed by the false teachers that it is possible to be in union with God and yet habitually sin. But if God is *light*, then by definition, those who walk in *darkness* cannot be part of him. This was a common error. It was felt that since the body was insignificant, it did not matter what a person did. The true essence of the person—the “spirit”—remained untouched and thus uncontaminated by sin.

**1:7 *walk in the light.*** The image here is of a person confidently striding forth, illuminated by the light of God's truth, in contrast to the person who stumbles around in darkness. ***purifies.*** If the first result of “walking in the light” is fellowship with one another, the second result is cleansing from sin. The verb tense indicates that this purification occurs not just once, but is a continuous process.

**1:8 *If we claim to be without sin.*** The second false claim: that they are sinless. It is one thing to deny that sin breaks fellowship with God (as in vv. 6–7). At least then the existence of sin is admitted (even if its impact is denied); but it is another thing to deny the fact of sin altogether.

**1:9 *If we confess our sins.*** After naming the problem, John states the antidote. Rather than denying their sinful natures, they need to admit their sin to God and so gain forgiveness. ***just.*** The granting of forgiveness is not merely an act of unanticipated mercy but a response of justice, since the conditions for forgiveness have been fulfilled as a result of the death of Christ.

**1:10 *If we claim we have not sinned.*** The third false claim: not only do they say that at the present moment they are without sin (v. 8), they actually claim never to have sinned! The false teachers might admit that sin does break fellowship with God (v. 6) and that all people have an inborn sinful nature (v. 8), but they would still deny that they, in fact, have ever actually sinned. ***we make him out to be a liar.*** By claiming sinlessness they are, in essence, saying that God is lying about human nature and about his claim to forgive people.

**2:1 *anybody does sin.*** While urging sinlessness as a goal to strive for, John knows that in this present life this cannot be achieved. So the issue then is how to deal with sin. The answer is found in the triple role of Jesus as the advocate, the righteous one, and the atoning sacrifice. ***one who speaks ... in our defense.*** Since people have no basis on which to ask for forgiveness, Jesus does so on their behalf. ***Righteous One.*** Jesus is righteous, both in the sense of being an example to follow and, especially, in the sense of not being contaminated by personal sin.

**2:2 *the atoning sacrifice.*** Jesus, the advocate, bases his plea (that their sin should be forgiven) on the fact of his death to pay for their sin. Such a sacrifice is effective because he himself was without sin, and so could take the place of another.

**2:3–11** John now addresses his own flock, exhorting them to follow God's commands. He identifies two “tests” by which people can be certain they actually know God: the test of obedience and the test of love. Those who truly know God live in his way and love as Jesus loved.

**2:3 *have come to know him.*** Previously John has spoken about *having fellowship with God* (see 1:3,6,7). Now he speaks about the parallel concept, that of *knowing God* (see 2:4,13,14; 3:6,16; 4:16). The verb tense indicates that he is thinking about a past experience (“we have come to know him”). ***If we obey his commands.*** The first test as to whether a person knows God, therefore, is moral in nature: does that person keep God's commands? To know God is to live in his way. The false teachers claim to know God but, as John will show, they live in a way that belies that claim.



## Scripture (Continued)

<sup>9</sup>*Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness.*  
<sup>10</sup>*Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him<sup>d</sup> to make him stumble.* <sup>11</sup>*But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.*

<sup>12</sup>*I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.*

<sup>13</sup>*I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning.*

*I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.*

*I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father.*

<sup>14</sup>*I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning.*

*I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.*

## Group Questions (Continued)

### TO CLOSE AND PRAY / 15–30 Minutes

- If you were to give a spiritual “weather report” on your life over the last six months and over the last week, what would it be: Dark and stormy? Bright and cloudless sky? Partly cloudy? Dull, slate-gray and overcast? Why?
- How do you feel about opening up to this group? How can they help you?
- Did you invite anyone to join the group?
- What would you like the group to remember in prayer for you this week?

## Notes (Continued)

**2:4 *does not do.*** The emphasis here is on sins of omission (not doing), in contrast to 1:6, where the emphasis is on sins of commission (walking in darkness).

**2:6** John introduces the idea of the "imitation of Christ." Christians are habitually to live the way Jesus lived. He is their model. As he walked, so should they walk. ***live in him.*** The third phrase which John uses to describe union with God. (In 1:3 he used the phrase "having fellowship with God," and in 2:3 he spoke about "knowing God.")

**2:7–11** If the first test of whether one is actually a Christian is moral in nature (Do you obey God?), then the second test (given here) is relational in orientation (Do you love others?).

**2:7–8** This is not a new command (v. 7), in that it is found in the OT (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5) and taught by Jesus (Mark 12:28–31). It is new (v. 8) in the sense that Jesus tied together two previously separate commands (that of loving God and loving others) and broadened their application (Christians are to love everyone, not just those in their own group).

**2:9–10 *light/love.*** John here links sets of contrasting images: light and darkness with love and hate. Those who are in the light, love. Those who are in the darkness, hate. In other words, enlightenment goes hand in hand with active care for others.

**2:11 *hates.*** "Hate" is not an emotional response to others; it is the lack of loving deeds done on their behalf.

**2:12 *children.*** Some scholars feel that John is addressing the whole community by means of this term. ***have been forgiven.*** The verb tense indicates that John is thinking of the forgiveness that comes at the time of conversion, whereas in 1:9 his concern was with ongoing forgiveness for subsequent sins based on the confession of sins.

**2:13 *fathers.*** The spiritually mature in the congregation. ***young men.*** To be a Christian does not merely entail the enjoyment of sins forgiven and a warm relationship with God. It is also a vigorous battle against evil. ***overcome.*** In the same way that Christ overcame Satan via his death and resurrection, so too Christians are to overcome the evil one.

**2:14 *word of God.*** This is the source of this overcoming power. The "young men" know God's will and have lived in conformity to it. ***lives in you.*** The word of God is meant not only to be understood, but it is also intended to be incorporated into a person's very being.