

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 45

1 John Part 2 – Themes

Sharon Kingston was our 11th grade English teacher. She was amazing. Her classes were interesting because she was interesting. She opened up literature in ways that made one enjoy even *The Scarlet Letter* (no easy achievement, at least for me).

Ms. Kingston had an energetic teaching style that invigorated the class and made us all want to learn. There were three major projects that year where she brought that energy to bear. We had to read two major works of fiction, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, mentioned earlier, and *Dandelion Wine*, by Ray Bradbury. The third major assignment was "the research paper."

The research paper was no ordinary paper. Ms. Kingston was bent on teaching us how to thoroughly research and write a paper. We had to turn in each major step in the process for her approval or indicated modifications. She had us do the research, turning in our findings on 3"x5" cards. She made us each write a "thesis sentence" and turn it in for her exacting scrutiny. We then had to do a full outline of the paper. She required us to turn the outline into a rough draft. When we gave her the rough draft, she returned it with red ink bleeding from each paragraph.

From those rough drafts, there was considerable rewriting before we turned in the final paper. This paper was carefully graded, a process that took her several weeks, and then she passed them out to us. We were all on pins and needles to see how much red ink was merited by our final products.

I would love to think after all that work, I could show you the paper today, but no such luck. Not because I failed to keep up with it over the years. To the contrary, I suspect I could have kept that as a trophy of sorts. But, Ms. Kingston required us all to turn back in our papers, and she took them home, shredding them and using them as mulch in her garden. Ms. Kingston never wanted to grade the same paper twice!

The research paper, and the books we read, all had a central focus on "themes." In *Dandelion Wine*, we read and wrote on themes of life and death, change, happiness, and more. There are recurring motifs of magic and memory. To understand these is to give a greater sense to the book beyond mere plot reading.

In like manner, as we read First John, we read certain themes and motifs which recur over and over. Our understanding of the letter grows, if we see how John uses these themes with nuanced differences in various places over the short five-chapter letter. John's themes and recurring ideas/words and phrases include some prominent ideas

of sin, love, light/darkness, and truth. We also find some subsidiary language used repeatedly, including children, little children (a different word in the Greek), and more. In this lesson, we will consider three metaphors/themes of John: light, darkness and family.

LIGHT/DARKNESS

In some ways we are at a disadvantage in the 21st century. We have electricity and can almost always access light. Before the darkness of night, our city lights come on, the lights in our homes and cars begin shining, and darkness is dispelled before it gets to take hold. Of course, it was not always that way. In Biblical times, darkness could be quite dark. Generally, lamps do not repel darkness as readily as electric lights. Darkness could be scary. It hid people; it hid activities, and it shut down productivity.

It is not surprising that darkness and light took life as metaphors for good and evil. People do things in the light when they have no problem with others seeing those deeds. People who wish to hide their sins, keep them from view. Of course, doing those deeds in the dark is an easy way to hide them.

The wisdom literature of the Old Testament is replete with usage of light for goodness and darkness for sin. Light is readily associated with God, the source of goodness and hence of “light.” Psalm 90:8 speaks of God dealing with people’s sin using these metaphors.

You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.

Scripture is allegorized to the light as it points out the darkness of sin and gives direction to the obedient.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Ps. 119:105).

The poetry in Ecclesiastes uses the metaphor similarly, relating light to wisdom and darkness to folly.

Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly and more gain in light than in darkness (Eccl. 2:13).

Job also uses the light metaphor for goodness and darkness as evil.

But when I hoped for good, evil came, and when I waited for light, darkness came (Job 30:26).

Just as light was associated heavily with good, it was tied closely to God, who was seen as the source of light. The Psalms cite God as the one who “lights my lamp” or gives insight into goodness (Ps. 18:28). God is called “the light of my salvation” (Ps. 27:1). It is in God’s “light,” that we “see light” (Ps. 36:9).

The ancient Levitical blessing is for God’s face to “shine” upon his people (Num. 6:25). This refrain is called upon in a number of Psalms asking for “the light of your face upon us, O LORD!” (Ps. 4:6, etc.).

The prophets also used “light” as an important metaphor. Isaiah wrote of those who “call evil good and good evil,” equating it to putting “darkness for light and light for darkness” (Is. 5:20). Isaiah 9:2 is a passage quoted in Matthew 4:15 for the coming of the Messiah,

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

John grabs the metaphor of light and darkness and uses it in both the Gospel and 1 John, the epistle. The usage was already present in the early church giving light as goodness and a reflection of God/Jesus, as well as darkness representing both individual sins and the power of Sin as something greater than individual sins.

Paul used the metaphor in 2 Corinthians 4:6 saying,

For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The early church understood God himself as the source of the purest light, as we read in the doxology of 1 Timothy 6:16,

To him who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

Similarly 1 Peter 2:9 spoke of the saved as those who had been called “out of darkness into *his* marvelous light.”

Paul distinguished the association of God as light from that of Satan who, though he fills the “darkness” end of the metaphor, tries to pretend otherwise:

Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14).

In the Epistle to the Ephesians, a regional letter from the same area where John’s writings would arrive in the succeeding decades, Paul made this terminology a part of what the churches would use, contrasting the life of the unsaved (in darkness) to that of the saved (in light).

at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true) (Eph. 5:8-9).

Paul used “darkness” as a proper term for the world under the control of the evil spiritual powers.

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12).

That was where all Christians were before they believed and were transferred into God’s kingdom of light.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son (Col. 1:13).

Into this framework of understanding that has grown out of the Old Testament Scriptures, through the writings to the early church, comes the usage in 1 John, which is later than the other writings we have considered. John writes with a church well-primed to understand his metaphor and theme.

We have two passages where John writes of “light” and “darkness.”

1. *1 John 1:5-7*

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.

In this passage, John begins in the present tense. This is a “moment-by-moment” tense in that it is divulging an action that we see in real time. It is a continuing action that is being experienced by the writer and reader. John tells us that God *is* light. In English we get the idea that God *equals* light, or that light is a metaphor for the very character and essence of God, but there is more in the Greek. It is not only that God’s essence is found in the metaphor of the goodness and purity that is light, and in the way that light trumps or conquers darkness, but also that God is this moment-by-moment. God doesn’t turn on the light. God is *always* light. Every minute, every second, with constancy, the God who doesn’t change *is* light.

John uses the same present tense to write that *is* no darkness in God. There wasn't before, isn't now, and never will be. Darkness is the antonym of God. God has no darkness in him.

John links this metaphor to sin as he continues to write of the claims some false teachers apparently were making.¹ Some were saying that they were having fellowship (*koinōnia* – κοινωμία) or a commonality in the relationship they had with God, even though those same people were walking in sin. John shifts back to the present tense to make his point. I can better indicate the present tense effect by adding a little to a normal English translation:

If we say (the Greek “aorist,” not present tense, just providing a narrative here), “we are having right now, minute-by-minute, a relationship with God based on commonality with God,” even as we are right now walking in darkness, minute-by-minute, then we are right now, minute-by-minute lying! We are not right now practicing the truth!

John continues with this present tense as he explains that if we are walking minute-by-minute in the light, then there is in fact a relationship based on commonality because God is also in the light. In this walk, we experience minute-by-minute the forgiveness and cleansing that comes from the blood of Jesus Christ.

We might wonder how the targets of John's concern are claiming to be in fellowship with God while walking in sin? We can surmise several ways. First, the context itself seems to indicate these people were not taking accountability for their own sins. Verse 8 indicates they were claiming not to have sins, and were thus deceived. As discussed in the last lesson, we know in the early church there sprang up a movement of those who thought of sin as something associated with the flesh, but to the extent that Christians were “spirit” as opposed to flesh, those sins did not really belong to the “spiritual person.” They were merely a case of “bodies will be bodies.” This denies the accountability we have for our own deeds and John would not let such a view sit unchallenged.

A second target might have been those who had left the mainline fellowship of the churches over these disturbed views of reality that divorced the body from the mind/spirit. These people were embracing a reality that denied Jesus Christ as God in the flesh, and claimed to be walking with God even as they denied the work of God in Jesus.

¹ We do not have the teachings of those John writes against. To some degree it is as if we are listening to one end of a telephone conversation, trying to deduce what the other person is saying. In the previous lesson (available at www.Biblical-Literacy.com), we discussed the conclusions of most scholars that these were leaders who left the church under the auspices of being super spiritual and having greater insights that disturbed the true sense of reality explained by Christian orthodoxy.

2. *1 John 2:8-11*

At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

In these verses, John writes of the “darkness passing away” and the “true light already shining.” John’s metaphor calls to mind that time of day when the night is rapidly fading and the morning sun begins to exercise its conquest of the sky. This is the era in which the church finds itself after the events of Calvary and the empty tomb.

I recently had breakfast with noted theologian and Pauline scholar N.T. Wright (“Tom”). Tom was in the middle of a series of lectures he was giving on the atonement and cross of Christ. These messages were preceding a book soon to be published. I asked Tom what about the cross was in need of a new book in 2016. His reply was on target, and it has stuck with me.

Tom spoke of Evangelical Christianity’s ready understanding that in the cross came a substitutionary atonement, seeking to make right in a just sense, humanity at odds with God because of sin. That prong of understanding we can equate to Jesus fulfilling the Old Testament experience found in the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*). There the sins of the people were placed on goats, one goat being sacrificed for the people, and the other goat being cast out carrying the sins away from the tabernacle/temple and the presence of God.

Tom then pointed out that many people today have lost the significance of Jesus also being the fulfillment of the Jewish *Pesach* festival in his day (“Passover”). The core experience of Passover was God freeing the people from the bondage of Pharaoh, bringing them into the Promised Land of blessings. In like manner, Jesus not only atones for sin (*Yom Kippur*), but also frees the believer from the bondage of sin (*Pesach*).

There is a law of sin and death that Paul talks of in Romans. In Romans 3:9 Paul spoke of Jew and Gentile being “under sin,” recognizing a power or state of sin that goes beyond the simple idea of people committing sins. Similarly in Romans 8:1-2 Paul speaks of the liberty that has come to

believers who escape a law of “sin and death.” It is part of creation’s “bondage to corruption” (Rom. 8:21). Paul uses the phrase of being a “enslaved to sin” (Rom. 6:6), noting the power of sin over humanity.

In Ephesians, a letter with which I am convinced the recipients of both the Gospel of John and 1 John had great familiarity², we also read of the unbeliever’s status as “dead” in sin. The letter calls the Christians out of darkness, equating it with the spiritual forces of evil and cosmic forces that exercise a measure of control over this world (Eph. 6:12). These are the forces Christ defeated. This is the face of Passover we can see in Calvary and the empty tomb.

This concept is pregnant in John’s terminology of the darkness fading and the light having already begun to shine. John uses the present tense to let the reader know this is something we are experiencing daily. This is the current state of affairs. It flows then logically into John’s next claim that anyone claiming to be in this light, while hating one’s brother, is actually in darkness. This is a person living under the power and influence of darkness, not light. God does not stir up hatred of another. God stirs up love. Jesus did not die because of his hatred for anyone. He died because of his love for everyone.

This theme of light and darkness conveys for John a marvelous visual imagery, a bit lost on those of us in the electric age, but very real and a daily occurrence/reminder for those reading the letter millennia ago.

FAMILY

A strong metaphor used in the New Testament for the church is that of the family of God. It is a natural metaphor since the people of Israel themselves were part of the “family of Abraham” (Acts 13:26). In Christ, believers are knit together into a common fellowship that easily draws on the metaphor of “family” and “family terms.” Early and often Peter referred to the Jews around him as “brothers” (Acts 1:15, 16; 2:29, etc.). King David was called a “patriarch,” meaning a “family leader” or “old father.” When Paul addressed the Jews in the synagogues along with the Gentile God-fearers, he called the Jews “brothers, sons of Abraham” while the Gentiles he called “those who fear God” (Acts 13:26).

At some point, as the church opened to Gentiles and as it became apparent that Gentiles did not first have to become Jews in order to be in the church, Paul and

² See the lesson I wrote on John, listed as Lesson 13, The Gospel of John – Some Final Thoughts; available at www.Biblical-Literacy.com under the tab “lessons archive” and the “current series” New Testament Survey, lesson 13, where I detail the peculiarities of language forms used in John and Paul’s letter to the Ephesians.

others began referring to members of the church with family terms. Even though the members had no blood relation in the sense of Jews and Abraham, the term as a metaphor was a marvelous description of the relationship of the church.

The family metaphor hearkens to the realization that believers are “born again” and have a common familial tie through the death of Jesus. Jesus himself noted that those who did the will of the Father were his “brother” and “sister” and “mother” (Mk. 3:35). So Paul could rightly call the church at Rome, Corinth, and other places his “brothers” (Rom. 1:13; 1 Cor. 1:10; Gal. 1:11, etc.). Paul would use the word “sister” to refer to Phoebe and others (Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 7:15; Philem. 2). We have a common “Father,” whom we all call “Abba” (Gal. 4:5-7). The church at large Paul would call the “children of God” (Phil. 2:15).

John used this same family metaphor to describe the relationships between his readers who are believers. He wrote of the evil of hating one’s “brother” (1 Jn. 2:9-11). Those who love each other are “children of God” while those who do not are “children of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:10). Jesus laid down his life for the church, and that is something the church should be willing to do for “the brothers” (1 Jn. 3:16). We are to meet the needs of our “brothers” in need (1 Jn. 3:17) and to pray for them (1 Jn. 5:16).

John also used the terms “children,” “little children,” and “fathers” to refer to many in the church. Consider the different words as John used them:

- **Little children:** (Greek: *teknion* - τεκνίον)

This is an affectionate term that John used six times in this letter. The only other usage is in John 13:33 where Jesus spoke affectionately of his disciples. John wrote of his readers as “little children” urging them not to sin (1 Jn. 2:1), reminding them their sins were forgiven (1 Jn. 2:12), exhorting them to abide in Christ with confidence (1 Jn. 2:28), keeping themselves from idols (1 Jn. 5:21), and instructing them to love in truth, not simply in word or talk (1 Jn. 3:18). John called the church “little children” when referencing their “overcoming” the antichrists (1 Jn. 4:4).

- **Children:** (Greek: *paidion* – παῖδίον)

John uses this term for children three times. The first instance is found in a poetic passage in 1 John 2:12-14. In that passage, John repeats a phrase “I write to you” or “I am writing to you” followed by the descriptors, “little children,” fathers,” young men,” “children,” “fathers,” and “young men.”

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name’s sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you

know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

Here, John writes to the “children” who know the Father.³ Again in verse 18, John calls on the “children” as those who have heard that “antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come.” The third instance is in 1 John 3:7, where John urges the children to let no one deceive them.

- **Fathers:** (Greek: *pateres* - πατέρες)
- **Young men:** (Greek: *neaniskoi* - νεανίσκοι)

Both “fathers” and “young men” are used in reference to the readers in the section of 1 John 2:12-14 set out above. This section is written in almost a self-contained fashion, but we are remiss if we fail to see its connection to the greater whole. Whereas those John wrote against were in darkness, in sin, and were not truly ones knowing God, John’s readers were different. They were family. They were little children, children, young men, and fathers. They were forgiven of sins. They did know God. They had overcome evil and the evil one. They had strength.

Scholars have worked to understand the reasons why John used these different family descriptions in this passage. Some believe that John was referring to different groups of people among his readers, seeing the words fairly literally as children, younger men, and older men. Against this reading is the way the ideas are set out, they don’t really correspond to age. At one point he writes to “fathers because you know him,” but then writes to “children, because you know the Father.” Furthermore, this would isolate women from consideration if we read these terms literally.

Other scholars suggest John is talking about different stages of spiritual development, with little children, children, young men, and fathers being four stages. The overlap of knowing the Father seems incongruent with this view as well. Furthermore, each of these qualities should be present in all stages of believers.

Some suggest that John writes to the “children” and then sets out several groups, with the fathers and young men being church officers (elders and deacons). A similar view is that these terms, in a more general sense, fit those older in the Lord versus those just starting out.

³ There is a translation difference depending upon which version you read. In most Greek versions, the word for children (*paidion* – παιδίον) is found in verse 14, but most translators move it back to verse 13 to keep a certain structure to the passage.

Perhaps the most meritorious view to me is one that sees this passage as setting out the importance of these concepts to believers at all stages. John uses the titles to give a poetic structure to what he has written, but his encouragement and the traits he wrote of are things that all believers should aspire to and take to heart.

John's family metaphor speaks to the root of human relationships. Every person is born into a family, even those who are quickly removed from that relationship. A family means something to everyone. We know the importance of a good family dynamic. We appreciate healthy and whole families, and we lament families that are torn apart and dysfunctional. John is calling us into a bond and tightness that is fully functional, healthy, and united as he uses the family language to edify the church.

POINTS FOR HOME

In selecting our points for home, I have chosen three of John's "familial" statements:

1. "*I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake*" (1 Jn. 2:12).

I love this. I need this. In my fourth decade walking in a confessed faith with my Lord, it is nice to be reminded, my sins are forgiven for the sake of Jesus. By the finished work of Christ, I have atonement. Thank you, Lord!

2. "*I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning*" (1 Jn. 2:13).

God is not new. Our faith is not new. Jesus is not new. We are part of a cosmic process that has real history and real future. We are not the center of this play, and nothing revolves around us. Eternal God has invited us into his dominion, and the life we live is one where our King and God sits on the throne! This is the source of the next point for home:

3. "*I am writing you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one*" (1 Jn. 2:13).

I have not overcome the evil one because of *anything* I have done. Eternal God has defeated the evil one. Jesus disarmed the bondage of sin and evil over me. In Jesus I have overcome. Thank you, Lord!