

1 John 1:1-2:2

Introduction

How do you tell the difference between what's fake and what's real? It's often very difficult.

We're probably all familiar with the idea of Fake News - news that appears to be real but isn't. It's particularly a problem with social media, where news can be shared with millions of people in a blink of an eye. Certain politicians seem to label everything as Fake News. But that's just the tip of the iceberg.

Last week, for example, this picture was in the news. It's a lovely picture of two women of different generations, and it was the winning entry to this year's Sony World Photography Award. Only... a few days later, it was revealed that it isn't a photograph at all. It was created using Artificial Intelligence. It's a fake.

Those who know about these things say that it's rapidly becoming pretty much impossible to tell the difference between a real photograph and one that's been computer generated.

Arguably, when we're talking about artwork, it doesn't really matter too much.

But when it comes to photographs that are being used as evidence in a courtroom, then it matters a lot.

There are times when it's really important to know the difference between what's real and what's fake.

And it's not a new problem.

This letter, that we're going to be reading over the next few weeks, is dealing with exactly that issue.

When it comes to matters of faith, what is fake and what is real?

When someone claims to know God, how do we know whether that claim is true or false?

This letter is written to Christians so that they can answer those questions.

The author, who is widely accepted to be the apostle John, wants us to be confident that our faith in Jesus is genuine. He wants us to be assured that we have eternal life through trusting in him. And he wants us to reject all who teach a different message to the one passed down by the apostles.

He begins with the apostles' testimony about Jesus - that in him, eternal life has appeared.

That's our first heading: Life has appeared.

Life has appeared

Please look down with me at verses 1 to 4.

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. 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. 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. We write this to make our joy complete.

John is writing as an eyewitness of Jesus.

No serious historian disputes the existence of Jesus. He is a real figure of history. And here is a letter from someone who was with him, who, along with the other apostles, heard him speak, saw him act, and lived in close contact with him. He heard him, saw him and touched him, both during his earthly life and then also after his resurrection from the grave.

Remember the passage we looked at last week at the end of Luke's Gospel. The risen Jesus appeared to his disciples and said to them, **'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see...'** (Luke 24:38-39)

John is one of those disciples. And what he and the others had heard, seen and touched they now pass on to us.

As we read these opening verses, it's clear that this Jesus, whom John got to know first-hand, is no mere man.

John calls him the Word of life who has come from the Father. His existence didn't begin in the womb of a young girl called Mary. He has existed eternally as God the Son, in loving fellowship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Not three separate gods. But one God in three persons. An eternal fellowship in which there is eternal life.

And, John says, this life has appeared. Eternal life is not hidden so that we have to search it out and find it. We don't have to be like treasure hunters sweeping a field with metal detectors to discover where it is. In Jesus, eternal life has appeared. When Jesus turned up on the world stage, so did eternal life. At a specific point in history, the Son came from the Father and appeared in the flesh. Without ceasing to be fully God, he became fully man. And he did so to make known the joy of eternal life in fellowship with God.

This is the Jesus whom the apostles heard, saw and touched. He appeared to them. And now they pass on what they know to us as first-hand, eyewitness testimony.

Their message is that life has appeared. To have eternal life is to have a personal relationship with God the Father through faith in Jesus. That's what they had come to enjoy. And their purpose in proclaiming Jesus to us is that we too might enjoy fellowship with God the Father through faith in him.

This, John says, is what will make his joy complete. It's the knowledge that those to whom he is writing share his faith in Jesus and have been made members of God's family with him.

It's a possibility that's open to each one of us today.

All we have to do is put our trust in Jesus. And we can do that because we have the eyewitness testimony of those who were there, who heard, saw and touched him, and can tell us all about him. When we listen to them, the exciting possibility of fellowship with our Creator become real!

But if we live in fellowship with God, it means that our lives will change completely. If we truly know God, then that will be evident in the way we live.

So, what John says to his readers next is that your lifestyle matters... because a person's lifestyle reveals whether their claim to have fellowship with God is real or fake.

So that's our next heading: Your lifestyle matters.

Your lifestyle matters

Please look again at verses 5 to 7.

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live out 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, purifies us from all sin.

To say that God is light is to say two things.

Firstly, it's to say that God is truth and that he makes truth known. In him there is no darkness. In other words, there is no error in him. Everything he reveals to us is dependable and true.

Secondly, to say that God is light is to say that God is holy and pure. There is no evil in him. Every promise he makes and every command he gives is for our good and blessing.

If we have fellowship with God, then we will 'walk in' or 'live by' those truths.

The Bible often describes those who don't know God as those who walk in darkness. Either they are ignorant of the truth about God, or they choose to ignore it. They are either ignorant of his promises and commands, or they choose to ignore them.

But those who have fellowship with God learn to walk a different way. Just as babies learn to walk as they grow up, albeit with a few bumps and tumbles along the way. Those who have fellowship with God learn to walk in his light. They learn to follow a new lifestyle.

They may too have a few bumps and tumbles along the way. But it's impossible for those who truly know God to do otherwise. Genuine faith shows itself in a changed lifestyle.

So, John says, if we claim to have fellowship with God but continue to lead a lifestyle characterised by darkness, then our claim to know God is a lie. It's false.

That will be seen firstly in what we believe. God has made truth known to us in his word, the Bible. When we have fellowship with God we long to know him better. We want to learn from him. I might claim to be friends with Joe Blogs down the street. But if I can't tell you anything about him, and don't know what he enjoys or makes him happy, then you might doubt whether I really know him at all. And it's the same with God. If we persistently show ourselves to be ignorant of the things he has caused to be written, or dismiss them as false or unimportant, then our claim to have fellowship with him can't be true. Those who have fellowship with God will always take the Bible seriously and will be determined to learn from it.

And that will be evident, secondly, in our actions.

Our actions back up our words. If I claim to be on a diet, but persistently scoff packets of biscuits and bars of chocolates, then I'm talking nonsense. My claim to be in a diet is plainly a lie. And it's the same with our claim to have fellowship with God. Our lifestyle either backs up our claim to know God or contradicts it. If we say we know God yet consistently disobey his commands, then we're talking nonsense. Our claim to know God is a lie. We cannot persist in sin *and* be close to God.

But if we learn to walk in his light, seeking to trust his promises and obey his commands, then, John says, we are truly members of his family and are united not only to him but also to one another. This is what unites us as Christians. It's not membership of a particular church denomination. Nor is it time spent together socially. It's a genuine faith in Jesus, which is based on the testimony of Scripture, and is borne out in our words and actions.

That's not to say, however, that we will walk in the light of God perfectly.

When someone becomes a Christian, they don't suddenly become sinless. They don't stop sinning altogether. In fact, that start to experience an intense battle with sin that they didn't experience before.

When we start to read God's word, the Bible, and live in the light it shines, we start to see our sin more clearly than we ever had before. We become more conscious of what terrible sinners we are.

That's what light does. It reveals what previously had been hidden from our eyes.

If a jeweller wants to examine a diamond, they'll hold it up to the light. If it has any defects, the light will reveal them.

If you're decorating your home, you can look at a wall that seems to be perfectly smooth. But if you shine a lamp on it, suddenly you become aware of how uneven it is.

Light reveals what is hidden.

And God's light does the same in us.

The more we walk in his light and submit our lives to the scrutiny of his word, the Bible, the more conscious of our sin we become. That's not a sign that something's wrong. It's genuine Christian experience.

That's why verse 7 ends as it does... with the assurance that the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross, purifies us from all our sin.

When confronted with our sinfulness we need to know what to do with it. And John wants us to understand that the first step is to acknowledge that our sin is real.

That's our final heading: Your sin is real.

Your sin is real

Please look down again at verse 8. John writes:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

As we become conscious of our own personal sin, there are two things we can do.

The first is to deny it.

There are numerous ways to deny the reality of sin. We can persist in sin and tell ourselves that we're doing nothing wrong. We can explain our sin away and make excuses for it. We can shrug our shoulders and laugh it off. We can re-define what sin is so that we can justify what the Bible prohibits. We can apply God's word to others but not to ourselves.

But all of that is evidence that we have deceived ourselves about our fellowship with God. **The truth is not in us**, John says. In other words, our claim to know God is false.

And what's more, we make God out to be a liar and show that his word has no place in our lives.

If we say that the Bible's wrong when it speaks of sin, we're calling God a liar. Clearly, then, any claim we might make about having fellowship with God is nonsense.

But there's another way of dealing with our sin. And that's to acknowledge that it's real and to put our trust in the remedy that God has provided.

Verse 9.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

And chapter 2, verse 1.

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for our but also for the sins of the whole world.

To confess our sins is to recognise that we are personally guilty.

It's more than admitting that we're not perfect in a general sense. It implies confessing specific things that we've said, done and thought. It includes the good that we have failed to do as well as the wrong that we have done. And it's more than simply apologising to God. It means asking for his forgiveness and for his power to change.

And God is faithful and just. He has promised that he will forgive all who truly repent and put their faith in Jesus. And he will keep that promise.

Jesus is at his side as our advocate, John says. He is the Righteous One, who never sinned in any way... whose perfect sacrifice on the cross atones for the sins of all who come to him in faith.

At the cross Jesus turned his Father's wrath away from us and onto himself.

Imagine you hold a bottle of water in your hand. And then imagine that you turn it upside down and pour it out on the ground to the very last drop. Once you've done that, there's no water left. There's no more to pour out. It's all gone.

That's what happened at the cross.

God the Father poured out every drop of his wrath on his Son. Jesus bore it to the very last drop. So now, if we belong to Jesus, there is no more wrath to pour out on us. God no longer has anything against us.

Keith Getty and Stuart Townend got it right:

This the power of the cross
Christ became sin for us

He took the blame, bore the wrath
We stand forgiven at the cross

If we belong to Jesus, our sin has been paid for. And God is just. He won't demand a second payment. His justice demands that he fully forgives all who come to him in repentance and faith.

We can have no fellowship with God if we won't acknowledge the reality of our own personal sin. But if we will acknowledge our sin, and come to the cross in repentance and faith, all the barriers to fellowship with God are removed.

Conclusion

This, then, is what real faith looks like.

John's telling us this so that we might examine ourselves and see what we find.

If we don't find genuine faith, we can do something about it.

If we do find evidence of genuine faith, then we can rejoice in the knowledge that our fellowship with God is real, and we can be assured that we have eternal life in Christ.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you that we can live each day in fellowship with you and with one another, through faith in Jesus. Please grant each one of us here a genuine faith which is evident in our lifestyle. Give us the confidence to confess our sin to you in the full assurance of forgiveness. And grant us the deep joy of knowing that we have eternal life as members of your family. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.