

T. Austin-Sparks:

We are going to be occupied with the First Letter of John. I want to read the first five verses of chapter one:

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us,) that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. This then is the message which we have heard of Him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all."

Between the time that John wrote this letter and the Lord Jesus had fulfilled His ministry on the earth, quite a long time had passed. John was writing this letter after all the other apostles had gone to be with the Lord. In that long period since the Lord Jesus went back to the Father, up to this time of John's writing, many things had happened. Many things had invaded Christianity to destroy the certainty of believers. A great number of different teachings had come in, there were many opposing interpretations of the teaching of Jesus. A variety of sects and parties had arisen. Divisions and separations between Christians had taken place.

In addition to these things, the world had invaded the Church. The world had gotten into the churches. In the Book of the Revelation, chapters two and three, we see how the world had gotten into the churches in Asia. Whenever the world gets into the churches, it always weakens their testimony. And it was just like that when John was writing his letter. To realize all this is to understand why he wrote this letter, that very difficult background gives a very good explanation to this letter of John. It is easy to understand how difficult the Christians were finding things. Of all the different teachings and interpretations, they did not know which to believe; they did not know which was the right and the true one. Of all the divisions amongst Christians, they did not know which one was right. And the world had brought in such confusion and such weakness that the believers were in a state of great difficulty.

Therefore, because things were like that, John wrote this letter. He not only wrote this letter, but he wrote two other quite short ones, and much about the same time, he wrote his Gospel and the Book of the Revelation. It is quite clear that John had a very special object in writing. In the first place, his object was to try to help these believers in their difficulties, to bring them back to the fundamentals of their Christian life, to tell them in all this confusion what was the true thing. That was his general objective. Then, if we look at this letter more closely, we shall see how he got to work to fulfill his object.

John has set out to confirm the faith of believers in a difficult day. And it is good to note that John himself was altogether untouched by all these conditions. There was no question in his mind as to where the truth was. He had no doubts whatever as to what was right. And so in this short letter, he uses a small phrase thirteen times. I suggest that you take your pencil at some time and underline these two words in this letter. Of course, I do not know whether it is two words in the Chinese language. In the English, it is just two words, and those two words John repeats thirteen times in this very short letter. And the phrase is this: "We know." Thirteen times he says, "We know." You see, there is no question in his mind. He has no doubt about things. He knows where he stands. And so he says repeatedly, "We know."

Then he had another phrase. Ten times he uses this other phrase, and that phrase is, "This is." And he links that "This is" with ten things. We have read the first one in verse five: "This is the message." The next one is: "This is the promise." Number three is: "This is the commandment." Number four is: "This is the witness." Number five is: "This is the love of God." Number six is: "This is the victory." Number seven is: "This is the confidence." Number eight is: "This is the antichrist." Number nine is: "This is He that cometh." And number ten is: "This is the true God, and eternal life." "We know," "This is," all questions, all doubts are set aside. And in this way, the apostle seeks to confirm the believers in Christ.

Now there are some other very distinctive marks. And I want to say here that I am not doing your Bible study for you. Perhaps you would like me to do that, but I am not going to make lazy people of you. So I am not doing your Bible study for you. That is why I have not given you the references to all those words. You go through the Letter and mark each occurrence of this: "We know." Thirteen times you will see it. And then go through the Letter again and mark every occurrence of "This is." That is a very helpful way of studying. That is what I mean when I say I am not doing it for you, I am giving it to you to do.

I have said that there are other distinctive marks in this letter, and these marks have to do with this matter of confirming faith. I think it is unnecessary for me to say that the conditions with which John was dealing are conditions which we have to meet in our time. We have to meet these many kinds of teaching, these many interpretations of the Scriptures. We are familiar with the many divisions amongst God's people, and we know so well how the world has invaded Christianity, and how the world has robbed the churches of their pure testimony. We have to face these conditions. Many of the Lord's people, especially the young people, ask: 'Which of all these is right? Which of these different teachings is the right one? Which of these divisions amongst the Lord's people is the right one?' It is a time of much perplexity, especially for young Christians, and that is why we are looking into this letter of John. We are going to let John help us, just as he helped the believers of his own day.

So I want to point out three other great words in this letter. For these words are words which will solve many of our problems. Indeed, John said that these were the things that would solve the problems of the Christians in his day. And the three words are: "Light," "Life," and "Love." You will probably remember how often John uses those words. They are the great words of Christianity: Light, Life, and Love. And John links with that last word "Love," the word, "Fellowship." He says a lot about fellowship in this letter.

Now we are going to begin with the first of these great words. We come back to the fifth verse of chapter one: This is the message, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. "God is Light." This is the message. Now we must remember that John is just full of the Old Testament. John always has the Old Testament as the background of his mind. I could give you a good hard piece of work now. If you were to take the Book of the Revelation written by John, you would find that there are four hundred allusions to the Old Testament in that book. I do not mean that there are four hundred quotations, but there are four hundred ideas taken from the Old Testament. I say, I will leave that to you. We are not going to attempt to look at four hundred Old Testament allusions.

But having said that, that brings us right to this matter of the message. THIS IS THE MESSAGE, THAT GOD IS LIGHT. And do you notice that John takes us back to the beginning? He says, "In the beginning." That is how he opens his Gospel. And in this letter, he is taking us back to the beginning. What is in the mind of John? He is thinking about the creation. And he is referring to the fact that the first thing in creation was light. God is Light. The first thing, of course, is God. That is the first thing in creation. It all begins with God. But what is God? What is the effect of God anywhere? When God comes on the scene, what happens? What is the first result of God coming in? John says, as in the creation, it was light. So in this present difficult situation, the first thing is God and Light.

Now we must go back to the beginning of the Old Testament. You know how the Bible begins, "In the beginning, God." Then the next thing, "And the earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep." A state of terrible chaos existed, everything was in a condition of disruption, disorder and barrenness. "The earth was empty, without form and void." There was no beauty there, and darkness was over the face of the deep.

Now it is believed by many that this condition was the result of a previous judgment. It was not the beginning of the existence of the world. The world was there, but it was in this terrible state. It is believed that this condition was the result of a judgment which had come upon the world in an earlier time. Literally, the world had been destroyed. And it is believed that the New Testament teaches that is going to happen again to this world. All things here are going to be destroyed in the judgment of God. When the Lord has taken away His people, then, as Peter says: 'The earth will be destroyed and burned up.' And John says, 'There is going to be a new heaven and a new earth.'

Now we can understand better today, than anybody in those days could understand, how easy that could be. It is known that there is in existence power enough in hydrogen bombs to destroy this whole earth. It has been definitely stated that that could be done in a very short time. Peter in his letter prophesied that that is going to happen. If there is to be a new heaven and a new earth, then the old one must be destroyed.

But John here is not particularly concerned with the destruction of the material earth. What he is concerned with is a spiritual condition which corresponds to the condition in the second verse of Genesis. If in the beginning of Genesis, the earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep, if that is how it was with the material creation way back there, John sees that there is a spiritual condition just like that in his own time. Everything has gotten into a state of disorder and disruption. Everything is broken up. There is no beauty to look upon. All these spiritual conditions just speak the one word - "Chaos." The verdict is, darkness over the face of the deep.

Now God intervened in that situation. In effect, God said, 'This is never how I intended to have things. This state of things does not express My Mind for the world.' So God came in to redeem the world from that condition. In Genesis, God intervened through His Son. John says in his Gospel, that it was through God's Son that all things were created. Then John goes on to say, that in this spiritual chaos, God has intervened again by His Son. In exactly the same way as He intervened in the material creation, so He intervenes in the spiritual. God said over the material creation, "Let there be light." And God says over the spiritual chaos, "Let there be light." And that light comes in through His Son. You will remember that in his Gospel, John said, "In Him was Life, and the Life was the light of men. And the Light shineth in the darkness." The Light came into the world through the Son.

Now John is looking at this state of things spiritually in his own day, and he says that God's way of redeeming this situation is to bring the Light in, to come in Himself in the Person of His Son as Light. God is going to reverse this whole situation, by His Son, in terms of light. The first thing in redemption is light.

First of all, light reveals the state of things. When Jesus came into this world, He made all see what the condition was. Men began to see things just as they were. It is wonderful to see how everything was made plain wherever Jesus came.

Are there wicked men about? Well, people did not see that they were wicked men until Jesus came. Of these scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said, "You are of your father, the devil." No one had ever thought that about scribes and Pharisees before. These were outwardly very religious men, and Jesus says, "You are of the devil." And as He goes on in this earth, it becomes perfectly clear that He is right. These very people whom the world thought were the religious people will one day crucify Jesus Christ.

As the true Light, He has brought out into the open the true condition of men's hearts. And you know, that is always the effect of Jesus coming anywhere. The first thing that we feel when Jesus comes near us is, What bad creatures we are! On one occasion, Jesus came into the life of Simon Peter. Simon Peter cried, "Depart from me, Oh Lord, for I am a sinful man." The first effect of the Light in Christ is to reveal the true state of man's heart. If man does not like to have his true condition revealed, he will crucify Christ. He will persecute and fight against the Lord Jesus. But if we are prepared to have our true condition revealed, we shall go down on our knees, and say, 'I am a sinful man, O Lord.'

The first effect of the Light is to reveal the state of things. The true meaning of such a revelation is to bring us to repentance. Any man or any woman who has never felt the awfulness of the sin of their own natures, has never met Jesus Christ. This is a test as to whether we have come to the Light. No man or woman can ever come near to Jesus Christ without crying out, "I am sinful." Like the prodigal, we have to say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in Thy sight." Let us have no doubt about this. A touch with Jesus Christ means we realize how sinful we are in ourselves. No true union with Jesus Christ can mean that we have any pride in ourselves. We can never have any true relationship with the Lord Jesus and feel that we are ourselves quite all right.

The man or the woman who lives nearest to the Lord Jesus is the man or the woman who feels they are the worst people in this world. The cry of their heart is, "HAVE MERCY UPON ME, O LORD." They are not just words, not just religious words, they come out of a revelation of our own hearts in the Presence of the Light. Will you remember this thing, that in one sense, the pathway to heaven is the pathway of discovering more and more how sinful we are in ourselves. The person who gets nearest to heaven is the one who knows best that they ought not to have a place in heaven, they are the people who are most ready to say, 'I am altogether unfit for heaven.' So the Light reveals the state of the human heart. It has to be like that before there can be redemption. This is the first step toward redemption. It was so in the case of the material creation, and it is so in the case of the new creation in Christ.

But then watch Jesus again as He moves about the country. You notice what happens? Here are poor people bound in affliction, here is a poor woman who has been suffering for many years, here is that poor man moving about the tombs, filled with devils, no one could tame him, every chain that they put on him, he snapped. Wherever Jesus went, He showed that behind these awful conditions was Satan. People had not thought of it like that; they thought, 'This poor woman.' Well, she is suffering from some malady; Jesus said, "Whom Satan has bound these many years." This poor man in the tombs, people said, 'Well, of course, he has lost his reason, he is mad.' But Jesus says, 'It is the devil in him.' And so, whether it is sickness or whatever it is, Jesus sees another power behind this. And when Jesus comes on the scene, the evil spirits cry out, "I know Thee Whom Thou art."

You see, the evil power hidden behind the chaos in this world is brought to light by Jesus. There are many conditions which are not according to the will of God. But we accept them because we say, 'Well, they are just human conditions.' If we had the Light, we should see that another power is responsible for that. So wherever Jesus went, He showed that by the Light these things were not according to His Father's will. Everywhere that He went, it became clear that this is not as God would have it, this is all wrong, God would have it different from this. That is what became clear by Jesus coming into the world.

Now come to this first letter of John. We have spoken of the conditions, the conditions that John was having to meet, the conditions that the Lord's people were having to meet - confusion in teaching, divisions amongst the Lord's people, and a lot of other things. John is saying, "That God is Light, and in Him is no darkness." All these are contrary to the mind of God. That is what the Light shows. False teaching is against God. Divisions amongst the Lord's people are against God. Any disorder and disruption is contrary to God. Therefore, the Light demands some reaction. Light is never passive. You realize that?! Light is never passive. Turn off all the light, and darkness is everywhere. Switch on the light, what happens? Well, something happens. The darkness goes. It cannot abide the Light. Light is effective. Light is active. Light does things.

Now that is the challenge to us. Do we claim to have much light? Do we think that we have got the truth, that we are a very enlightened people? Well, what is happening with all the Light that we have got? Is it just passive light? There is no such thing. If it is not active light, it is not light at all. Light is intended to do something. Light is intended to change conditions. Just imagine, how can people who claim to have the Light be responsible for division amongst the Lord's people? That is a contradiction of light. So John says, "If we walk in the Light, we have fellowship." One effect of walking in the Light is having fellowship one with another. And some people think that having light means to make divisions, to break up fellowship. John says, that is a lie, that is not the truth. Light means that we must walk in it. "And if we all walk in the Light, we shall have fellowship one with another."

You see, light effects things. "Light" is a practical matter. I am not content with just giving you theory. My object in coming here is not just to give you more teaching. Probably, this week will see the end of my special ministry here, and before long I shall have gone again. What I am really concerned about is this: Not that I have given you a lot of words, but that I have given you light, or the Lord has given you Light. Because true Light always does things. The darkness cannot abide the Light. The darkness cannot overcome true Light. That is what John said about the Lord Jesus, "And the Light shineth or was manifested, and the darkness overcame it not." Light ought to be something very effective. Are we walking in the Light? Or are we just claiming to have light? Do remember that every bit of true Light is power. There is power behind this Light.

Light is power. It is always power. Is all that which we claim to have as Light, really power? Is all the Truth that we possess, power? Does it do things? Or is it only in our heads? Is it only a theory? You see, when Jesus came a Light into the world, something happened wherever He went. And that is how it all came to be. "God is Light, and in Him is no darkness at all."

THIS IS THE MESSAGE. This is the thing that we carry with us. Not just something in words and theory, but something that does something. We must examine all our truth, just to see what it is doing. How much it is changing the situation from chaos to light, from disorder to order, from emptiness to fullness, from ugliness to beauty. These are all the effects of light. That is what Jesus does, because He is the Light of the world. That is how it ought to be without teachings.

Now I only commence on this first message. I may have more to say on this particular thing, if God wills tomorrow night. But do not wait until tomorrow night, start tonight. Ask the Lord how much of all that you have in your heads is doing things. What changes are being made by the Light, for no light is true light that does not make changes.