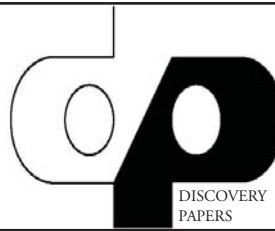


EMERGING FROM THE DARKNESS

SERIES: IN HIM IS NO DARKNESS AT ALL



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1 John 2:3-11, 18-27
3rd message
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Ten years after Mother Teresa died, a book of her letters was published¹. It indicated that she had long and painful battles with doubt, and it raised a lot of eyebrows. A woman known around the world for great courage and deep faith wrestled with feelings of inadequacy. It is important to acknowledge that those who know the Lord well and serve him faithfully will experience doubt. Scripture is abundantly clear that every child of God will spend some time in the wilderness, wrestling with hopes that are not realized, with expectations not met, with loneliness, and even with anger.

So where does God-given assurance come from? Where do we turn for help? One text we can benefit from is before us. We'll look at 1 John 2, beginning with verse 3.

Stepping back briefly, we recall that John teaches and reteaches three themes in this letter: faithful obedience, sacrificial love, and undiluted truth. In this study we will encounter all three offered as a way forward when we are facing doubt.

The Antidote to Doubt

Verses 3-6:

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

One of John's three themes, the priority of obedience, is clearly called for in these verses. This word is not issued to rebels, but to believers who lack confidence of their standing with the Lord. Reassurance is required, an answer to the question, "How do we know that we know him?" (verse 3). When false teachers sow seeds of doubt, how can we be secure? "Knowing that we know" is language that is repeated in this letter.

John is writing to contradict Gnosticism, a heresy named for the Greek word for knowledge (*gnosis*). The false teachers who oppose apostolic Christianity major in secret knowledge and hidden prophecies, undermining the faith of ordinary saints who are not "in the know."

Those who claim to have higher knowledge often

brandish a form of authority. We might remember that the teachers of the law in Jesus' own time dismissed him because he didn't have the right academic credentials. He hadn't studied with the right teachers. Those with a superior technical education, or those who have mastered the language of emotions, are widely admired in our world. Yet something more than manmade credentials is required for true authority.

John writes to insist that the secrets of the Gnostics are neither true nor advantageous. Assurance comes from obeying what we already know. John is commending obedience not in the sense of working harder, but as an antidote to being seduced by lies.

We should consider ourselves in light of this teaching. Aren't we prone to buy the latest books, subscribe to podcasts, download Bible software, seek out the newest teacher, learn tools for increased introspection—and postpone obedience that might cost us something—postpone walking as Jesus walked?

It is not true that the better educated people have an advantage in the things of God. Information alone does not increase moral courage or create a passion for prayer. Insider information does not lead to a hunger and thirst for righteousness. Across the globe poor and uneducated churches are aflame with the light of the Spirit, while those with vast libraries are too often confused and hesitant.

Finally, let me make an observation about the phrase "walk as Jesus did." Jesus didn't obey commandments external to himself. Jesus walked as he walked because the ways of God were written on his heart, and because he was sure of the presence of the Spirit. Jesus' life was filled with beauty and boldness. He wasn't a religious rule-keeper. His summary of the call to be human was simple—love God and love your neighbor. That is the way Jesus walked, and that is what John is urging upon his readers.

The Ancient and New Command

Another of the Gnostic claims is challenged in verses 7-11.

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. 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.

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates

his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. 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.

These deceivers claimed not only secret and superior knowledge, but also the “newest and latest” religious insights. They claimed that the faith taught by the apostles was hopelessly out of date.

John first refuses the notion that what is new is superior. The old commandment (love for God and neighbors) has power precisely because it is ancient, “since the beginning.” And then he notes a beautiful paradox: the ancient commandment is new—it is the very nature of love to always be new in our experience as the darkness passes away. Jesus’ understanding of love made it new and increased its scope—loving not just neighbors, but enemies; committed not only to justice, but beyond justice to mercy.

It is made plain in verses 9-11 that John is speaking of the command to love (the second of his recurring themes). Darkness is passing away because love dispels the darkness. We gain (in)sight when we love our brother—understanding ourselves and seeing clearly what once was confusing about other people.

Consider the dark world of feuding and angry families. All have been hurt by the others. Every new outburst is blamed on some prior offense. These patterns will never be untangled by attempts to figure out who is right—only love which gives up its rights and forgives from the heart can bring healing.

There are only two alternatives: darkness, blindness, and stumbling; or love, clarity, and stability. The apostles have faithfully taught the way of love. The Gnostics’ “new religion” offers nothing in comparison.

I am going to postpone consideration of the next two paragraphs of the text to a later message because I think they are parenthetical—a structured catechism that John has taught in other settings and that comes easily to mind for him at this point in his letter. For our purposes here we will pick up the argument, reassurance for a flock being undermined by false teachers, in verses 18-23.

The Truth You Know

Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but

because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

“The last hour” in this passage is better translated “a last hour.”

We have already noted the lure of secret knowledge and getting in on the newest thing. Now the false voice says, “You are not radical enough—you have grown flabby in your faith.” The antidote to this distraction is the third of John’s repeated themes—undiluted truth. False messiahs, apocalyptic cults, and obscure prophecies all have cachet that causes faithful discipleship to seem pale in comparison. “They went out from us,” perhaps to the mountains with guns and survival supplies.

Antichrist figures can seem alluring because they are mimicking events that are yet to come. The last hour is coming. The antichrist is coming. The end of the age will take place at God’s appointed time, and at the very end there will be a man of sin, a parody of Jesus, who will fool the world.

But John’s perspective on history, present and future, is very important. There are always devilish lies in the mouth of some false prophet. Every hour needs to be regarded with utmost concern. The alternative to flabby faith and sleepy commitment is not an unbiblical new prophecy, but the voice of the Spirit.

All believers (even Mother Teresa) face doubts and discouragement. These experiences make us vulnerable to false claims of secret knowledge, or “new” spirituality or antichrists masquerading as prophets. John insists that obedience to our calling, love in place of selfishness, and truth in place of cults are the way of discipleship.

Remain in Him

In conclusion let’s turn to verses 24-27. Notice the word “remain,” the Greek verb *meno*, which occurs four times in these verses.

See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us—even eternal life.

I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him.

We cling to the gospel and so *remain* “in the Son and in the Father.” The Holy Spirit (“the anointing you received from him”) *remains* in us.

It is not possible to avoid wilderness periods, and the words of deceivers will never cease. But we are standing on rock and need not be moved. The truth does not change and the anointing of the Spirit teaches us exactly what we need to face each day’s responsibility. Whatever this day brings, I make a choice to remain in him, to trust him, to assume that he keeps his promises and to refuse false alternatives.

One of Jesus’ beautiful word pictures is centered on the Greek word *meno*, to remain. John recorded it for us in his gospel, John 15:4-5:

“Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

A branch nourished by the vine—walking as Jesus did, loving our brother, trusting the Spirit—will bear much fruit.

NOTES

1. *Mother Teresa*, edited by Brian Kolodiejchuk, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light—The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*, © 2007, Doubleday, New York, NY.

