

Eternal Life or Idols

Condensed Notes of an Address on 1 John 5: 18-21, given at Wooler, November 3rd, 1949.

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(Extracted from Scripture Truth Vol. 37, 1951-2, page 26.)

In reading this short passage my main point is contained in verses 20 and 21; but just a few words, to start with, on verses 18 and 19, where we have a very important distinction. The Spirit of God draws a very clear line of demarcation between the saints as born of God and the world out of which they have been taken. We must ever bear in mind that we belong to a chosen race, to a generation that God has brought into being by His own act. The character of this new race is declared, since, "whosoever is born of God sinneth not."

Now here we have one of those abstract statements that occur so often in this remarkable epistle. That is, the Spirit of God invites us to consider the matter in its own essential nature and character, abstracting it in our thoughts from all other things, and from the complications they may introduce. To consider a thing abstractly is very helpful, if we really wish to understand it.

Let me use an illustration. A chemist might hand you a bottle and uncorking it might bid you take a sniff. You do so and recoil, saying it has a disagreeable smell. He now hands you another bottle containing a fluid that looks like water, and when opened you can hardly detect any odour. Yet he tells you that the most potent ingredient in the first bottle was that very liquid. In the first bottle its real nature was obscured by other substances. Only when presented in abstract form was its true nature revealed.

Now we are living in a world of many mixtures. The object of the great adversary is to make the mixture as complicated as possible. The object of the Spirit of God is to differentiate, and make the abstract character of the child of God on the one hand, and of the world on the other, as plain as possible.

As born of God we have a nature that is sinless. Such an one, abstractly considered, "cannot sin," as we are told in 1 John 3: 9. Other verses in this epistle contemplate us in our present practical condition, and then consequently speak of our sinning. But when the Lord comes and we stand with Him in glory what is now true of us only in this abstract sense will be true of us practically, absolutely and forever. Thanks be to God!

So also in verse 19, the world is considered in an abstract way. It lies "in wickedness" or "in the wicked one." You may wish to tell me that there are some very nice and amiable people in the world. Granted, if you consider the world with its strange complications, from a practical point of view. In Romans 7 and Romans 8, the "flesh" is viewed abstractly and so we read that there is no good in it, and that those who are in the flesh "cannot please God."

May God help us all, and particularly those who are young, to seize the abstract point of view. Those born of God cannot sin. A man in the flesh cannot do anything but sin. The world lies in the grip of the wicked one.

That may seem a strong thing to say of the world, but it is true. The devil is shaping the course of things. Men may imagine they are doing it, but they are not. When I was a small boy I was taken to see a marionette show. There were the little dolls quaintly dressed all moving or dancing on the stage. But from where I sat cracks in the boarding beneath the stage allowed me to have a glimpse of the men who

were pulling the strings, so the dancing of the dolls was not so wonderful to my childish mind. Men on the world stage may look imposing — Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, and the rest — but when we see the devil pulling the strings that control their movements, they fascinate us no more.

The trouble with us so often is that we ignore the line of demarcation that God has drawn. Let us see that we maintain it, for we mix things at our peril.

The first statement of verse 20 is this: "We know that the Son of God is come." We do not know that some great and inscrutable Person is come, and that He became the Son of God by the manner in which He came. That is not the truth, and what our verse states is the truth. "Son of God" is a Name of most illustrious import. His coming into Manhood was an act of humiliation, a stoop of unimaginable greatness — far greater than would have been involved had it been needful for Michael the Archangel to assume the lowest form of animal life, and become a worm.

"Son of God" is not a Name taken, expressive of His humiliation but the Name of His original glory, and we have some knowledge of what His coming has brought us. God has been made known, and the Father's Name fully declared. Glimpses of the true God had been granted in previous ages, but now, "Him that is true" stands fully revealed.

But wonderful as the revelation is, it would mean nothing to us had we not eyes to see it. So we get the second great statement of our verse that "He hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true." We may well bless God for a gift like that.

How was that gift bestowed? Well, not only have we been begotten of God, but from the ascended Christ we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. As we read in 1 John 2: 20, it could be said even to babes in Christ, "Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things." In the last scenes, as recorded in Luke's Gospel, we read how the Lord opened the understanding of His disciples that they might understand the Scriptures. That I should connect with John's record of how He breathed into them, saying, "Receive ye Holy Ghost;" bestowing upon them His risen life in the energy of the Spirit. Hence there is given to us the understanding to take in the things of God.

So in our verse we have, firstly, the **revelation** in the coming of the Son of God. Then, secondly there is **illumination** by the gift of this understanding. You may remember that the Lord Jesus said, "The light of the body is the eye." Someone might feel inclined to say "But I thought that the light is the sun." So it is, if we view things objectively. But viewing things subjectively, and as a matter of our experience, the eye is the light. The sun might be shining at noon, but if I had no eye there would be nothing but darkness in me.

Twice in our verse God is spoken of as "Him that is true." Here as ever, truth stands in contrast to all that is false and unreal. In God Himself we have the ultimate Reality. Hence the sharp contrast that is drawn between Him and the world, which is so full of unreality. In its **moral character** the world is a vain show, but even in a **physical and material** way unreality is increasingly stamped upon everything. Very few things are just what they seem to be. The very food we eat is largely faked in one way or another. This epistle tells us, "The world passeth away." We need shed no tears over that statement.

But verse 20 carries us a step further. Not only have we the revelation and the illumination but, "we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ." We are at a loss for one word to express this. We might say, origination, but that would better express the fact that we are "of God," as verse 19 told us. This goes beyond that, for we might have been "of" Him without being "in" Him. We are "in Him that is true," inasmuch as we are brought into His life and nature, by being "in His Son Jesus Christ;" so

perhaps derivation is the more suitable word. Him that is true, then, is clearly God the Father, and we are in the Father by being in the Son. So here we have that which the Lord spoke of anticipatively in John 14. He looked forward to the day close at hand when the Spirit should be given to indwell the disciples, and He said, "At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in Me, and I in you." We derive everything from Him.

This is indeed a most marvellous thing — something beyond all our thoughts. The depth of our plight as fallen sinners was such that it would have been wonderful if God had redeemed us and fitted us to know and be with Him, just as a dog knows and loves his master. A dog may display considerable intelligence and great devotion, but all within the limits set by this fact — it cannot share the life and nature of its master. We are not mere spectators or observers, we have that which no angel has, being brought into the very life and nature of God, by being "in His Son."

Are we then to entertain the thought that the Son is merely an intermediary, and possibly something inferior to God the Father? This false idea has always been simmering in some minds, and appearing more or less boldly from time to time. The closing words of our verse dissipate this thought. Pointing an emphatic finger at "His Son Jesus Christ," the solemn pronouncement is, "This is the true God, and eternal life."

In the first verses of his Gospel, John introduces the same Person as "The Word," and asserts His essential Deity. Here He is "The Son," and His Deity is affirmed with equal emphasis. The adjective "true" is added here, since the world, which is energized by the deceiver, lies darkly in the background. But He not only is the true God, so that all that may be known of God is revealed in Him, but He is also the eternal life, the Fountain-Head of that life which now is ours, so that we may know and enjoy the revelation.

Into that life have we been brought, and we have it now. This does not in any way clash with that which we find frequently in Paul's writings — "The end everlasting life" (Rom. 6: 22) — that life as a future thing. You might walk into a greenhouse in this country and see a cactus growing in a pot. It looks like a spiny cucumber standing up on its end. If you ever visit the West Indies you will see the same sort of cactus in its tropical fulness, twenty feet high, and not stunted by a chilly clime. The essential life of both is the same. We have the life now, though its fulness belongs to the age that is to come.

That which hinders the development of that life now may be summed up in the one word, **idols**.

Hence the last verse of the epistle. The word, "little" should not be there. The whole family of God is addressed and not babes merely. The closing exhortation is "Keep yourselves from idols." What is an idol? We may define it by saying, an idol is anything which usurps in the heart and mind that supreme place that belongs to God alone. That which takes such commanding possession of our thoughts becomes an idol.

In these words the Holy Spirit has uncovered for us the root of much failure and weakness amongst the children of God. The idolized thing becomes like a film over the eye, dimming its vision of the brighter things above. Here I feel very sympathetic with my younger brothers and sisters, for I am now sufficiently old to look back to youthful days when there were not nearly the number of clever things invented, calculated to fascinate and fill the mind to the exclusion of far better things. In my young days there were no motor-cars, no aeroplanes, no radio, no television, no cinemas, enticing you to spend time on them rather than on the service of the Lord and things of eternal value.

So our closing word must be one of warning. You may hear great and wonderful things in

meetings, and even yield them a ready assent in your mind, but if you are decoyed away to spend most of your time in the pursuit of other things that bear the idol character, your Christianity will be but a poor anaemic thing.

So let me repeat once more John's closing admonition, "Children, keep yourselves from idols." And may we all have grace to respond with "**Amen,**" **and really mean it.**