

What manner of love. 1 John 2. 28-3. 3.¹ Ontario, Canada. May 2007.

I want to focus on just three simple points from the opening verses of 1 John 3; namely, what we are ... what we shall be ... and what we should be.²

It is always helpful when people tell you plainly why they are writing to you. And towards the close of his letter, John supplies us with one of several reasons he had for writing : 'These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God; that you may know that you have eternal life', 1 John 5. 13. Clearly then it was the apostle's intention – and, behind him, it was God's intention – that all who know the Lord Jesus as Saviour and Lord should have the assurance of salvation – should have the certainty of possessing eternal life. And to this end John provides his readers with a set of distinguishing evidences and characteristics of those who have experienced the new – the spiritual – birth. These are the birthmarks, if you like, of those who, by faith, have become the children of God.³

John's checklist is in fact very short. Following the order in his letter : (a) first, '*everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him*', 2. 29; then, a little later, (b) '*everyone who loves is born of God*', 4. 7; and, finally, (c) '*everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God*', 5. 1, literally.

We read the first of these.⁴ John had earlier written of Christians as those who 'know God', as those who 'abide in the Father and the Son', as those who 'walk in light'.⁵ But here – 2. 29 – is the first time in his letter that John mentions being born of God.⁶ And, it seems to me that, as he writes the words 'born of Him', the apostle's heart and soul are overwhelmed – staggered, enthralled – by the splendour – by the grandeur – by the sheer magnificence, of what he is saying.

So much so that the apostle is unable to suppress an exclamation of wonder and amazement. 'Behold', he bursts out – 'look at this', 'just think of this' – '*what manner of love* the Father has bestowed on us that we should be called children of God'.

Many goods you will find for sale today in the UK are made in India, China or Hong Kong – and some people I know take great interest in identifying which country their purchases have come from. And, interestingly, the word the apostle John used here – translated 'What manner of' – originally meant 'from what country does this come?' The word was employed in John's day to describe anything which was strange and unaccountable – used with the sense, 'I've never seen anything like this before'. The word isn't found in the Greek Old Testament at all and, in the New Testament, is sometimes – as here – used to express astonishment. For example, Matthew reports in his gospel how that he and the other apostles used this very word when our Lord stilled a great tempest on the Sea of Galilee – they 'marvelled', Matthew recalls, 'saying, *What manner of man* is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him!', Matt. 8. 27.

John is saying then that 'This love the Father has given us is a most unusual kind of love – an *extraordinary* love ... it is, in effect, an 'alien' kind of love – a 'foreign' kind of love'. And so it was! For this love did not come from *anywhere* or from *anyone* on earth!⁷

John has much to say in his writings about the new-birth. In his gospel, he speaks of the *means* of the new-birth: 'As many as received Him (the Lord Jesus), to them He gave the right (the authority) to become children of God, to those who believe in His name', John 1. 12. There also he stresses the *necessity* of the new-birth: the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, 'Marvel not that I said to you, You must be born again', John 3. 7. But what led John, who recorded Jesus' words to Nicodemus, to marvel was not '*how*' we can be born again, but '*that*', by God's grace, we have been! In his gospel therefore John spoke of both the *means* and the *necessity* of the new-birth. But here in his letter he traces it to its *source and spring* : the Father's astonishing love for us.

And I note that, according to John, it is not merely that God has shown or revealed His love to us – which of course He has. It is a love, John says, which He has 'given' to us (literally; rendered 'bestowed on us' in the KJV and the NKJV) – given as some priceless treasure.

I might say to someone who is going to see one of my friends or relatives, 'Please give him or her my love'. And I expect that person to say something like 'Malcolm sends his love'. In practice, my request simply means 'Assure so and so of my love for them'. But God has 'given' us His love in a *far deeper sense* than that – because, as John knew well, *giving His love to us* involved Him in nothing less than *giving His Son for us*. Just think of the words of the Lord Jesus, 'The Father Himself loves you', John 16. 27! And only the manger of Bethlehem and the Cross of Calvary tell us how much He does!

'The Father has given to us' is literally 'has given to us the Father' – not very elegant English. That is, as John wrote it, 'the Father' and 'us' are thrown together in striking contrast. For His part, the Father – God – is awesome, majestic and holy; for our part, we are creatures of dust, undeserving, and unclean. Yet His unheard of love forms the bridge; it is this which has brought Him and us together in such a breathtaking relationship.

'Behold, what manner of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God!' – 'children' not just His 'offspring' – which is true of all men and women as God's creatures. Paul preached at Athens, 'in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets (Aratus and Cleanthes, 3rd century BC) have said, 'For we are also His offspring', Acts 17. 28 – but, as Christians, we are not only God's offspring – we are children – with all the warmth and affection which that word conveys.

'That we should be called' – that such a designation – such a title – should be ours. *Luke* tells us in chapter 11 of his Acts of the Apostles that, *by the world around*, the disciples of the Lord Jesus, were called 'Christians', Acts 11. 26 (at Antioch); but *John* tells us here that, *by God*, they are called 'children'. The world identifies us as Christians ... God identifies us as His children. Indeed, God calls us the same as John called his readers, 1 John 2. 28; 'And now, little children (the same word), abide in Him'. I don't doubt that it meant a great deal to the original readers of the letter that the only surviving apostle would address them as his children, but this was nothing compared with the fact that Almighty God did the same!

But note that John doesn't say 'what manner of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called *His* children' – but 'that we should be called children of God' - 'we should be called children of Him who is God' – stressing the honour, the dignity, the nobility of our relationship.

I think of young David in the Old Testament, who, following his spectacular victory over Goliath – dare I say 'stunning' victory over Goliath – was invited by the messengers of the then king – Saul – to marry one of Saul's daughters. 'Does it seem a little thing to you to be a king's son in law', David responded, 'seeing that I am a poor man, and lightly esteemed (of no great importance)?', 1 Sam. 18. 23. But we who know the Lord Jesus as our Saviour have been brought into a *far more glorious family* than that of a mere earthly monarch – even if he was the king of Israel!

I recall reading of a Danish missionary who went to India many years ago and who once asked a young convert to help him translate John's letter. When they reached our text for this evening – 'should be called the children of God', the young man protested, 'It is too much! Let me rather translate it that we should be permitted to kiss His feet'.⁸ The very idea that mere creatures of dust, undeserving and sinful, should be taken by God to be His own children was just too much for the young man – it was so amazing – so incredible. And it *is* so amazing – it *is* so incredible – and yet at the same time it is most wonderfully true!

But remember please that the apostle John was no recent convert. Far from it! He was now an old man. In his youth, he had been one of the favoured few to company with the Lord Jesus for over three years – and alone had lent on the Lord's bosom at the so-called Last Supper. His mind was stored with the 21 chapters of the fourth gospel – and what a gospel! This man had more spiritual knowledge in his little finger than I will ever have. And yet his soul was gripped afresh and lost in wonder at the (to him) very familiar truth of the new-birth. Alas for us that we so easily lose the enjoyment and thrill of being born of God!

'The world does not know us', John adds – 'the world does not recognise us' – as what we are – as being God's children. Yes, it is true of course, as John says in verse 10, that we should stand out as different by the kind of life we live; 'In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother'. I read of one pompous church leader who once asked a young people's group, 'And why do people call me a Christian?' At first there was a silence. And then, finally, one brave lad suggested, 'Perhaps, sir, because they don't really know you'. Alas, a serious point lies there.

But John is saying in our verse that there is nothing *physical* or *external* to alert the world around to the fact that we are God's children. We look the same as others – we wear no halos. And it should come as no surprise that we pass unrecognised, because, as John says, the world was blind to the glory of the Only-begotten Son Himself. 'Therefore the world does not know us', John says, 'because it did not know Him'. As John wrote at the beginning of his gospel, 'He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not', John 1. 10. As you know, confronted by our Lord's wisdom and mighty works, the men of His home town asked in astonishment, 'Is not this the carpenter?'⁹

'Behold, what manner of love the Father has given to us', John said in verse 1, 'that we should be *called* children of God'. And now in verse 2 he wants to assure us that the title 'children of God' isn't only a label. "Beloved, now we are children of God".¹⁰ We are, that is, God's children, not in *name only*, but in *fact* and in *reality*. We really are part of God's family.¹¹ And we are that now!

As you know, there are many wonderful 'now's' of blessing in the writings of Paul ... 'being *now* justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him', Rom. 5. 9; 'there is therefore *now* no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus', Rom. 8. 1; and '*now* in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the

blood of Christ', Eph. 2. 13. But here John contributes one of his own – 'now we *are* children of God'. Make no mistake, we shall never be more the children of God than we are at this moment.

And, as if that is not enough, on top of it all, John adds yet more – 'And it is not yet manifest – it has not yet been revealed, not yet disclosed, unveiled – what we shall be, but we know that when He is manifested – when He is revealed – we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is'.

And so, having spoken of our *present dignity*, John directs our attention to our *future destiny*. And, just as the reality of our *present identity* is hidden from *the world* around us, so the details of our *future destiny* are hidden from *us*.

For we can no more comprehend what we shall be than the world can comprehend what we are. And this for the simple reason that we do not possess the faculties, the apparatus, the equipment to enable us to grasp what we are going to be. We simply cannot imagine, for example, what it will mean to be raised – should we die – as Paul expresses it in 1 Cor. 15 – in incorruption, in glory and in power – to be raised a spiritual body. An English doctor of the 17th century, Thomas Browne, once wrote, 'When we begin to talk about life after death, we're just like two infants in a womb discussing the nature of their future life'. Or perhaps, I suggest, like two caterpillars discussing what it will be like when they become butterflies! But, while frankly admitting that there is so much we do not know, John lets us peer through the keyhole of the other world to assure us that we do know the most important thing ... we know that we shall be 'like Him' – the Lord Jesus.

For 'when He is manifested – when He is revealed – when He appears – we shall be like Him'. Note that 'shall'. It stands in marked contrast to what John said at the end of chapter 2; 'when He is manifested (same words) we *may* have confidence and not shrink back with shame from before Him at His coming', 2. 28. There is no 'may' here! There is no room here for any doubt. This is the happy – and the certain – prospect for the believer. As Paul said in Romans 8, 'whom He (God) foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that He (the Lord Jesus) should be the firstborn among many brethren', Rom. 8. 29. Surely this must be the *ultimate* expression of God's favour – to make us like, not Abraham (friend), Moses (face to face), or Daniel (greatly beloved, Dan. 10. 11, 19). But like His own Son!

Well did Mr. Darby write:

'And is it so — I shall be like Thy Son?

Is this the grace which He for me has won?

Father of glory (thought beyond all thought!) —

In glory, to His own blest likeness brought!

'We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is' – that is, it will be the face-to-face sight of our Lord which will trigger the great change and transformation.¹² One day, John tells us in Revelation 22, 'His bond-servants shall worshipfully serve him: and they shall see His face', Rev. 22. 3-4.^{13 14}

I have sometimes asked myself which is the more amazing – that there *was a day* when the Saviour *came down from heaven*, then to be *made like His brethren*¹⁵ – or that *there will be a day* when each of His brethren will be *taken to heaven*, then to be *made like Him*. I have never been able to answer that question – I only know that, as Christians, we are an incredibly blessed and privileged people!

And then in verse 3 John draws our attention to the practical implications of our hope. The very first word, 'and', tells us that this verse is intimately and logically connected with what has gone before. Moving on then from *what we are*, 1-2a, and *what we shall be*, 2b, John now directs us to *what we should be*. Moving on, if you like, from speaking of our *dignity* and our *destiny*, he now directs us to our *duty*¹⁶ - 'Everyone that hath this hope in Him (the Lord Jesus; literally, 'on Him' – that is, 'set on Him') purifies himself, even as He (the Lord Jesus) is pure'¹⁷

We know from chapter 1 that we don't 'cleanses' ourselves from our sins. Verse 7 there makes it clear that only the blood of Jesus does that; 'the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin'. In her early days, Frances Ridley Havergal, the famous hymn writer¹⁸, was plagued by spiritual depression. But she had a life-transforming experience one day when reading her Greek New Testament. When she came to 1 John 1. 7 she discovered from the tense of the verb there that the blood of Jesus *keeps on* cleansing the believer – and that from every sin. Make no mistake, as Miss Havergal discovered, there is infinite cleansing power in the Saviour's blood.

But though His blood 'cleanses' me from the *guilt* of my every sin, He expects – and requires me to 'purify' myself from the *practice* of sin. The word 'purify' which John uses here suggests shrinking from contamination and pollution¹⁹. It is then for me to maintain my own purity amid the defilements and allurements of the world. As Paul wrote to Timothy, using the same word, 'Keep yourself pure', 1 Tim. 5. 22.²⁰

And this is *not* an optional extra for the Christian – it is the duty of every single believer. Indeed, I note that John switches at this point from the corporate, collective language of verses 1 and 2 – 'we are God's children'; 'we shall be like him'; 'we shall see him' – to urge each of us as individuals to purify ourselves. And I am to purify myself,

John says, even as the Lord Jesus Himself is pure. The Lord Jesus Himself is the pattern and standard of my purity!²¹ And it is 'as He *is* pure' – that is, because we shall see Him as 'is', we should become like Him as He 'is'.

And I note that John uses the same tense here that he had in chapter 1 verse 7 – there that the blood of Jesus *keeps on cleansing me*; here that I am to *keep on purifying myself* – to keep on resisting all the defiling influences around me²² ... to be constantly on my guard against anything impure – indeed, to avoid feeding my mind with anything which might arouse unclean and sinful thoughts²³ – whether the magazines I read, the TV programmes and DVDs I watch, or the internet websites I visit!²⁴ The apostle Paul prescribes the Christian's wholesome mental diet, 'Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are *pure*, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—think – meditate – on these things', Phil. 4. 8.

One day, John assures me, I shall be altogether like the Lord Jesus. It is a staggering thought and prospect. But, John insists, this very hope carries profound practical implications. For that same Lord expects me to begin that process myself now, and not least in this – that I imitate Him in His purity and freedom from all defilement.²⁵ May He so help me.

Footnotes

¹ In 1 John 2. 28 John starts his second circuit round the 'spiral staircase'.

² The section seems to fall most naturally into three parts:

(i) The position present and future of the children of God (3:1-3).

(ii) The essential character of the children of God (4-9).

(iii) The outward manifestation of the children of God (10-12). (Westcott)

³ There is a sense in which all men and women are the offspring of God in that they have been created by God and derived from Him. But at the same time, Scripture is very careful to differentiate that from those who come into this special relationship of being God's as the result of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ Taking it for granted, then, that God Himself is righteous, John tells us we must conclude that those who have this righteous God for their Father will, as a habit of life, practise righteousness – that those who are, as John says, 'born of Him', will exhibit (will show) the family traits – the spiritual family likeness. John does not say, 'Ye know that every one that is born of him doeth righteousness'; he puts it the other way round. By which he means that if you see men and women who are living a truly righteous life in the sense of the New Testament term 'righteousness,' you can be quite sure, says John, that they are born of God.

⁵ In effect, John says, 'I want you to realise that as the result of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ you are not only in fellowship with God, you have become children of God; you are born of Him'.

⁶ It will be mentioned more than once from this point onwards (see 3. 9; 4. 7; 5. 1, 4, 18).

⁷ It came from the Father and was, as John says later, displayed fully in the death of the Lord Jesus ... 'In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins', 1 John 4. 9-10.

Peter attributes new-birth to God's great mercy (the response of pity to misery); 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant ('much', great) mercy has begotten us again to a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead', 1 Pet 1. 3. James attributes new-birth to His sovereign will, 'Of his own will he begat us (brought us forth) by the word of truth', James 1.18. But John attributes new-birth to His extraordinary 'love'. Not that this is in any way surprising; love is very much John's key word; occurring 46 times in this letter alone, plus 'beloved' five times (as 1 John 3. 2).

⁸ 'The 'Speaker's Commentary' quotes the following anecdote: 'When some heathen converts to Christianity were translating a Catechism into their own language, they came upon 1 John 3:2. They stopped. 'No; it is too much,' they said; 'let us write that we shall be permitted to kiss his feet.'" (Pulpit Commentary)

⁹ The world failed to recognise God so far as He was manifested in creation and history (1 Cor. 1. 21); and its failure was still more conspicuous when He was manifested in His Son (John 16. 3). It is to this revelation specially that the Apostle refers. The 'Him' is God in Christ, as in 1 John 2. 29.

¹⁰ 'Beloved' is a very appropriate word of address following verse 1; cf. 'Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another', 1 John 4. 11.

¹¹ We are not like street kids staring in goggle-eyed through window of some high-class restaurant window; we on the inside, feasting. What a lofty, breath-taking position. Go on; stretch and catch hold of it today.

¹² In the breaking of bread we remember Him principally as He was; but we will see Him as He is.

¹³ Remember Absalom, 'And David said, Let him turn to his own house, and let him not see my face. So Absalom returned to his own house, and saw not the king's face ... So Absalom dwelt two full years in Jerusalem, and saw not the king's face ... And Absalom answered Joab, Behold, I sent to you, saying, Come here, that I may send you to the king, to say, Why am I come from Geshur? I may as well have been there still: now therefore let me see the king's face', 2 Sam.14. 24, 28, 32. City and royal house not enough; only king's face would suffice.

¹⁴ Both inwardly (for that sight will accomplish in an instant what long years of sanctification here have failed to do) and outwardly (for now we have a body perfectly suited to the earth; but then we shall have a 'spiritual' body, perfectly suited to heaven). Paul tells me in 1 Cor. 15 that, because of my links with the first man Adam – because of my natural descent from him – in the present I have a body which is like his was – 'soulish', vv. 44-45. The first man was 'out of the earth' – 'made of dust' – 'Dusty Adam' if you like – and, because of my links with him, I too now have a body made of dust, v. 48. But, as a *Christian*, I also have links with *another* Man – with 'the Man of heaven', v. 48 (lit.) – with the Risen Lord. And I can be fully confident that – because of my links with Him – I shall one day have a body just like His. Just as I now bear the image of 'the man of dust', I shall one day bear the image of 'the man of heaven', v. 49.

Paul has in his mind the fact that Adam had his own proper realm and that Christ has His. Adam belonged to earth – the Lord Jesus belongs to heaven. Adam had a body suited to the earthly realm – the Risen Lord has a body suited to the heavenly realm. In terms of chronology and their appearance in the world, the 'soulish' man (Adam, the man of dust) came first – and the 'spiritual' (Christ, – the man of heaven) came later, v. 46. And that sequence is exactly the same for us. First, now, we have a 'soulish' body – perfectly suited to the earth. But then, one day, we shall have a 'spiritual' body – perfectly suited to heaven. Wow – what a mind-blowing prospect.

Paul told the Philippians, 'our citizenship is in heaven, from where we await the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will *transform* our lowly body that it may be *conformed* to His glorious body', Phil. 3. 20-21. Do you see the connection? In effect, Paul is saying that a *heavenly* people must have bodies suited to the *heavenly* realm – just as the Saviour's own glorious body is.

¹⁵ John 6. 33, 50; Heb. 2. 17.

¹⁶ 'The hortatory overtones of this verse are obvious, even though it is couched in 'indicative' language'.

¹⁷ This is the only place in which John uses the word 'hope'; which is a characteristic thought of both Paul and Peter. John doesn't argue the point – he doesn't discuss it. He simply states it ... 'everyone who has this hope in Him (better, on Him – that is, set on Him, the Lord Jesus, as its ground and basis) purifies himself, just as He (the Lord Jesus) is pure'. As far as the apostle is concerned, the one thing follows the other as surely as night follows day.

¹⁸ For example – 'I am trusting Thee; Lord, speak to me; Master, speak, thy servant heareth; O Saviour, precious Saviour; Take my life and let it be; True-hearted, whole-hearted, faithful and loyal; Who is on the Lord's side'.

¹⁹ It is not common in the New Testament and occurs only once in the Gospel of John, in John 11. 55.

²⁰ Like the people of Israel before the manifestation of the presence of God, Exod. 19. 10-11.

²¹ In this life men become like the objects of their worship. As to idols, they that make them shall be like unto them (Psa. 115. 8). As to believers, even now, 'reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord' they are 'transfigured unto the same image from glory to glory' (2 Cor. 3. 18).

²² See 1 Cor. 6. 18 and compare the example of Joseph, Gen. 39. 12.

²³ And stimulate unclean fantasies in my mind.

²⁴ See Phil. 4. 8.

²⁵ The pattern of the Lord Jesus is frequently held up as an example to believers; 1 John 2. 6; 3. 7, 16; 4. 17.