

Christ, the Atoning Sacrifice

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 59:1-8

Background Scripture: 1 John 2:1-6; 4:7-21

1 John 2:1-6

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. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

³ We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. ⁴ Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. ⁵ But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: ⁶ Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

1 John 4:9-17

⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

¹³ This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.

¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

¹⁵ If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God.

¹⁶ And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷ This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus.

Key Text

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. —1 John 4:10

Costly Sacrifices

Unit 2: Christ's All-Sufficient Sacrifice

Lessons 6-9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify his or her advocate with the Father.
2. Explain the motivation and significance of Jesus' sacrifice.
3. List three ways to practice 1 John 2:6 in the week ahead.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Surprising Symbol
- B. Lesson Context

I. The Source of New Life (1 John 2:1-2)

- A. Our Advocate (v. 1)
- B. Our Propitiation (v. 2)

II. The Proof of New Life (1 John 2:3-6)

- A. The Test of Obedience (vv. 3-4)
- B. The Model of Love (vv. 5-6)

When You're Snowed In

III. Love in Action (1 John 4:9-12)

- A. God's Initiative (vv. 9-10)
- A Modern Propitiation*

- B. Our Responsibility (vv. 11-12)

IV. Certainty of Knowledge (1 John 4:13-17)

- A. Divine Intervention (vv. 13-14)
- B. Human Confession (vv. 15-17)

Conclusion

- A. Transformed Reality
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Surprising Symbol

Today, the cross of Christ is recognized the world over. We see it on church buildings, use it for headstones, depict it in paintings, and wear it as jewelry. The latter is particularly surprising for becoming so common, given that the cross was the instrument of torture and death for notorious criminals in the Roman world. In that era, crosses along roadsides symbolized the ultimate consequence for challenging the Roman Empire's power.

How could such a terrible object become the universal symbol of a faith that preaches love and offers new life? The answer to that question lies in the purpose of Jesus' death on the cross: today's lesson.

B. Lesson Context

Our text comes from two parallel sections of the New Testament epistle designated 1 John. It is one of three letters by John among the General Epistles. This is a section of the New Testament consisting of the eight letters: Hebrews; James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Jude.

The epistles of 1, 2, and 3 John are not explicitly ascribed to the apostle John by name, yet the early church ascribed these epistles to him, just as they did with the Gospel of John.

The three letters have close connections to the language and themes of the Gospel of John, so it is reasonable to conclude that all came from the same author. In doing so, we carefully distinguish the apostle John from John the Baptist or John Mark (Acts 1:5; 12:12; etc.).

The letter 1 John and the Gospel of John explicitly state that the author was an eyewitness of Jesus' life and ministry (John 1:14; 1 John 1:1-3). These two works of Scripture have similar purpose statements (compare John 20:31; 1 John 5:13). Both purpose statements find their basis in what the readers can "know" as a certainty. This is a distinctive emphasis of the author. He wrote about 14 percent of the New Testament, but his writings feature over one-third of the New Testament's 250 uses of the Greek word that is under-

neath the idea of “to know” (more on this in the commentary below).

The letter 1 John addresses growing controversies in the first-century church about the nature of Christ and the Christian life. It seems some believers were influenced by a common concept of that day that said all material things are by nature evil, but that which is spirit is by nature good. On this basis, some began to deny that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human. After all, if material things are evil, then it would be impossible for the good God to exist as a human in a body. The letter of 1 John refutes this. Some students see the growing heresies of Gnosticism and Docetism as playing a part in this problem.

I. The Source of New Life

(1 John 2:1-2)

A. Our Advocate (v. 1)

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.

The author addresses readers as *children* often (1 John 2:12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). The term suggests a close and affectionate connection between the writer and the original audience. This term might also hint that the readers are either younger or less mature in their spiritual journey than the writer.

The Greek word translated *advocate* here is the same one in John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7, where it describes the Holy Spirit. Christ’s forgiven people still sin; they recognize as much if they are honest with themselves. When believers sin, they do not require justification once more; instead, as children of God, they receive forgiveness through the intercession of Jesus Christ with the Father. Is forgiveness a one-and-done affair? Is the once-forgiven sinner returned to the life of death on the first failure after forgiveness?

The answer is no, as the author sketches Christ’s ongoing role as an “advocate,” one who speaks on behalf of another. Another way of saying this is that Christ intercedes for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25). With God the Father depicted as

the righteous judge, Christ speaks on our behalf, identifying us as those whose punishment has already been taken by Christ himself. Christ is *righteous*, meaning he is not guilty of any sin and is entirely in accord with God’s right way.

B. Our Propitiation (v. 2)

2. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Older versions of the Bible use the word *propitiation* rather than *atoning sacrifice*. The underlying ancient Greek word is rare in the New Testament. The noun forms appear exclusively here, in Romans 3:25, and 1 John 4:10 (see below) and refer to something that turns away wrath. A verb form is in Hebrews 2:17.

Central to the gospel message is that Christ’s death was the once-for-all-time sacrificial offering that shifted our fully deserved punishment for sin onto him, who is the sinless one (2 Corinthians 5:21). This doctrine is often referred to as “substitutionary atonement.” Christ’s substitutionary atonement is sufficient for all our sins—past, present, and future. This reality is fundamental; this is grace. It is available for *the whole world*, but it is effectual and operative only for those who receive it through faith in the blood (Romans 3:25-26).

II. The Proof of New Life

(1 John 2:3-6)

A. The Test of Obedience (vv. 3-4)

3. We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands.

The author uses the verb translated *know* about two dozen times in the five short chapters of 1 John. These mostly affirm the Christian’s

How to Say It

Docetism	Doe-set-iz-um.
Ecclesiastes	Ik-leez-ee-as-teez.
epistles	ee-pis-uls.
Gnosticism	Nahss-tih-sizz-um.
propitiation	pro-pih-she-ay-shun.

confident faith in Christ and assurance of salvation. Here, the question is what assures us that Jesus' is indeed our advocate and propitiation (atoning sacrifice) when we sin. The answer is that keeping Jesus' commandments is our proof (John 14:15; 15:10). If Jesus is Savior, then he must also be Lord.

But how can one who keeps Jesus' *commands* also need ongoing forgiveness of sins? The writer uses the stark contrast between ongoing sin and ongoing obedience to capture the nature of the Christian life. As a people habituated to sin, we continue to sin even after receiving the gift of Christ's atoning death. But as people with faith in Christ, we continually submit our lives to his authority. So sin, ongoing in the lives of believers, is continually being overcome. Sin is no longer in control, no longer at home.

What Do You Think?

What steps can believers take to overcome sin and submit to Christ's authority?

Digging Deeper

How has your life changed since you submitted to Christ's authority?

4. Whoever says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person.

This verse restates and reinforces 1 John 1:6: "If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth." Some believers among John's original readers may have separated faith in Christ from obedience to Christ. Perhaps thinking their "good" spirits were completely separate from their "evil" bodies, they lived as if their actions had no bearing on their relationship to Christ (see Lesson Context). Nevertheless, the contents of a person's heart will eventually become apparent through their actions (compare Matthew 12:34). Therefore, the writer completely rejects the idea that someone's actions would not align with their declared faith.

B. The Model of Love (vv. 5-6)

5. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God

is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him:

By contrast, our following Jesus' teaching expresses the effect of everything he has done. Jesus' death for sinners was the fullest expression of God's love for humanity, and Jesus' teaching instructs us how to express God's love to others (John 3:15; 1 John 3:16). This makes God's love for humanity our love for humanity. The ancient Greek word translated *made complete* can take various shades of meaning, depending on context. Here and elsewhere, the sense is that of a finished task because its goal has been achieved. The writer uses the word this way five times in his Gospel (John 4:34; 5:36; 17:4, 23; 19:28) and four times in his first epistle (here and 1 John 4:12, 17, below; and in a negative sense 4:18).

6. Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

To confess Christ means to obey Christ. To *live as Jesus did* is to follow his example (John 13:15).

The author fronts this conclusion by introducing a Greek word translated as "to live"; he uses this word 23 times in this letter. In doing so, he speaks of a close, ongoing connection. This image originated from Jesus as he compared his followers to branches connected to him as the vine (John 15:1-11). The author's linkage to Jesus' teachings clarifies that a believer cannot keep Jesus' commandments or follow in Jesus' footsteps through his or her own strength. Doing so is only feasible by remaining in Christ and letting God's Spirit produce fruit in and through the believer. This teaching applies to everyday life. Those who live in Jesus will inevitably live their life in ways reflecting his love and teaching. In the text between 1 John 2:6 and 4:9 (not in today's lesson), the author continues to trace the theme of love as it applies to various situations.

What Do You Think?

How can you be better attentive to the work of God's Spirit to produce fruit in you?

Digging Deeper

How will such fruit empower you to abide in Christ?

When You're Snowed In

I have a vivid childhood memory of when my family was snowed in by more than a foot of that white stuff. I tried to help my dad dig out. But I quickly encountered a problem: with every step I took, I sank deeply into the snow. I could hardly move. The solution was for me to follow my father's path as he did the major work of clearing snow.

The challenge to walk as Jesus walked and live as Jesus lived may seem overwhelming. How can we possibly live in the same way that the sinless, holy Son of God lived? That's the first step: we admit our weaknesses. The second step is to realize that Christ knows our weaknesses (Hebrews 4:15; compare Romans 8:26). While achieving perfection through our own endeavors is impossible, this does not imply that the benchmark of perfection is reduced (Matthew 5:48). We will still sin. However, forgiveness is still available (1 John 1:9). What is the most important improvement you must make in your walk? —C. S.

III. Love in Action

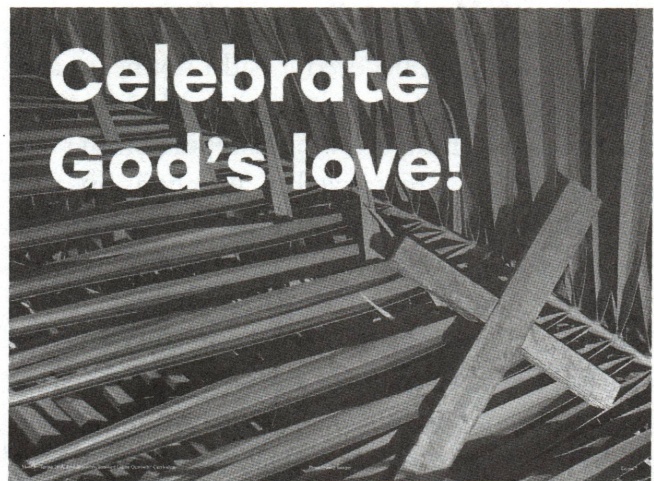
(1 John 4:9-12)

A. God's Initiative (vv. 9-10)

9. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

How can we fail but to see John 3:16 restated here? The supreme expression of God's love is demonstrated through the incarnation: the divine Son of God putting on human flesh to announce and deliver salvation personally. The description of Christ as the *one and only Son* emphasizes his uniqueness and value to the Father. The eight other translations of the underlying Greek word—not always referring to Jesus—are found in Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38; John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; and Hebrews 11:17.

God sent his Son to give life to humanity and thereby allow them to enter the presence of the holy God. Jesus not only accepted and affirmed that mission, but he also narrowed the focus of his uniqueness and exclusivity of mission when he said, "I am the way and the truth and the life.



Visual for Lesson 7. *Point to the visual and ask volunteers to brainstorm ways to celebrate God's love in the upcoming week.*

No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Truly, we live only *through him*.

10a. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us

An astute observation from years ago is that what is unique about the relationship between the true God and people is that pagan religions tell stories about humanity's search for god(s). In contrast, Christianity tells the story of God's search for us (Luke 19:10). Christ became incarnate in a world that had rebelled against God (Romans 3:10-12, quoting Psalms 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Ecclesiastes 7:20). His becoming human is an act of love, and his death on the cross brings that love to its fullest measure. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

The message of the gospel calls us to love God and our neighbor (Matthew 22:34-40). All such love begins with God's love, expressed and made available through the death and resurrection of the incarnate Christ.

10b. and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

John aims to convey to his audience that love is an action, not an empty term. He illustrates this by detailing how God demonstrated his love for the world: by becoming the propitiation (*atoning sacrifice*) for our sins. The declaration in this half-verse echoes what the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 5:8. see discussion of this word in commentary on 1 John 2:2, above.

A Modern Propitiation

I wouldn't have believed it had I not heard and seen it personally. The exact date was May 31, 1989, and I was watching a TV news report on the resignation of Representative Jim Wright as Speaker of the House of Representatives. He was resigning under a cloud of alleged ethics violations.

Near the end of his lengthy speech, he made a statement that amazed me: "Let me give you back this job you gave to me as a propitiation for all of this season of bad will that has grown up among us." I remember wondering at the time whether the average viewer in the TV audience knew what *propitiation* meant! The man was sacrificing his position in the hope that it would bring the ethics turmoil to a halt.

But notice a key difference: the man was giving up a job to deflect wrath *away from* himself; Jesus gave up his life to deflect God's wrath away from us and *onto* himself! How should your life change now in realizing this fact? —R. L. N.

B. Our Responsibility (vv. 11-12)

11. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

This implication of the gospel is unmistakable. After receiving God's love, we must recognize our responsibility to love the same people God loves. We do not need to ask who our neighbor is when hearing the command to love our neighbor (Luke 10:29). God loves all because Christ's death makes atonement available for all (1 John 2:2, above). God loves first and loves those who do not love him. And so must we who have received his love. Even our enemies are objects of God's love and so must be of ours (Matthew 5:43-47).

What Do You Think?

What are some ways we can love one another just as God has loved us?

Digging Deeper

How do you deal with negative attitudes that prevent you from loving those you might consider unlovable?

12a. No one has ever seen God;

Many texts reflect the fact that God cannot be

seen (examples: Exodus 33:20; John 1:18; 1 Timothy 6:16). But in Christ, God became a visible, physical human, so to see Christ was truly to see God (John 14:8-9); the next half-verse expands on this.

12b. but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

The imperative to *love one another* is so important that John uses that phrase five times in this letter (here and 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11-12). This command is a repeated part of Jesus' message (John 13:34-35; 15:12, 17) and stressed by others as well (Romans 13:8; 1 Peter 1:22). As we love others, then our actions make God visible to the world.

Regarding the word *made complete*, see commentary on 1 John 2:5, above.

What Do You Think?

Describe someone you know who excels at loving people. How will you follow his or her example?

Digging Deeper

Who will you ask to be an accountability partner to encourage you as you practice loving others?

IV. Certainty of Knowledge

(1 John 4:13-17)

A. Divine Intervention (vv. 13-14)

13. This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit.

The presence of the Holy *Spirit* expresses a new reality. The Spirit's presence in us gives us the certainty that we are in Christ and he is in us. Christ's promise of the Spirit's presence is a fact for all who are Christians and can be a fact for all who are not yet Christians (John 14:16-17; Romans 8:9-11; Ephesians 1:13; 1 John 3:24; etc.). The Holy Spirit's presence is God's presence. Life in the Spirit is the life of God's love, demonstrating and assuring that we belong to him through Christ's atoning death.

14. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

The beginning of this epistle is a stirring declaration that the incarnate Christ, seen by eye-

witnesses, is the basis for the gospel message (1 John 1:1-3). In shorter form, the author now repeats that declaration. By using the word *we*, the author declared he had seen Jesus personally and, therefore, his testimony is that of an eyewitness. The mission of *his Son to be the Savior of the world* reinforces the same thought of John 3:17.

B. Human Confession (vv. 15-17)

15. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God.

This verse is a summary statement of the plan of salvation. A doctrinal error often seen is to take such summary statements as being the entirety of that plan. For someone to acknowledge *that Jesus is the Son of God* is good as far as it goes. But remember that demons confess the same thing and are still lost (Mark 5:7; James 2:19). Spiritual maturity (Hebrews 5:12) is required for understanding the entirety of that plan, which results in knowing how *God lives in a believer, and they in God* (compare Acts 2:38; Ephesians 2:8-10; Hebrews 11:6; etc.).

What Do You Think?

How would you respond to someone who claims that they can confess that Jesus is the Son of God but still willfully and intentionally commit sin?

Digging Deeper

What is the relationship between right belief and right actions? How does James 2:14-26 inform your response?

16. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

The author turns to the imperative of *love*. Christ's life, death, and resurrection fully demonstrate God's love. We can say without reservation that *God is love* (also 1 John 4:8). For us to confess Christ truly means that we love one another. Such love is found among all who genuinely experience the abiding unity with God brought by Christ. Without such love, our confession is empty. With it, our confession is complete.

17. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus.

This is the third time the writer has spoken of perfection with regard to *love* (see commentary on 1 John 2:5; 4:12, above); he will continue to do so in the verse that follows this one. And again, Jesus is our model. These concepts are so foundational that they bear repeating!

What's new here is how it all ties in with *the day of judgment*. The complete love of the Father revealed within us empowers us to face God's judgment confidently. This boldness stems not from our righteous deeds but from our trust in God's mercy to save us (Titus 3:5). The nature of our loving works *in this world* will demonstrate the presence or absence of saving faith (James 2:14-26). Jesus had much to say about this coming judgment (Matthew 11:20-24; 12:36; 25:31-46; etc.).

Conclusion

A. Transformed Reality

Symbols are intended to be meaningful, but people must acknowledge that meaning for the symbols to have their desired effect. I may know a red light means "stop," but I will stop at the red light only if I honor its intended meaning.

So it is with the cross. This central symbol of Christianity reminds us of Christ's death, the saving work he accomplished on it, his resurrection, and the love that motivated every part of his ministry. Our failure to love others will indicate that we don't honor the symbol of the cross—we betray the cross instead. What can you do to honor the intent of that symbol today?

B. Prayer

Lord God, your love surpasses our imagination. We are filled with thanksgiving because Christ died and rose for us. Lead us to love one another as you have loved us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Christ's death for us moves us to a life of love for others.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Invite learners to share questions children ask that are hard for adults to answer simply. (*examples*: Why is the sky blue? How do you know the sun will rise tomorrow?) Write these questions on the board, then challenge learners to come up with some appropriate answers.

Alternative. Distribute the slips of paper from the “What Am I?” activity on the activity page, which you can download. Tell learners to keep their creature a secret but think of a few activities that describe what their creature does as hints to their identities. Learners will take turns sharing their hints, allowing the rest of the group an opportunity to guess their creature.

When all creature identities have been revealed, take a poll to see which was the hardest to guess. Lead into Bible study by saying, “Some things are hard to explain or describe. The way we attempt to do so may indicate some things about what we believe. Today’s lesson requires special attention to how the apostle John explains certain ideas and describes certain relationships.”

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read 1 John 2:1-6. Distribute to small groups handouts (you create) that have these four phrases printed in the four corners, one phrase per corner:

Things both God and I know
Things that God knows that I don't know
Things that I know that God doesn't know
Things that neither I nor God knows

Have learners share their reflections in small-group discussions. Expect responses to the last two of the four to be “nothing.”

Ask a volunteer to read 1 John 4:9-12. Provide large paper or poster board along with appropriate markers to the groups. Instruct groups to create a visual rendering of the way these verses

explain (1) the primary way the love of God has been demonstrated, (2) what that signifies for us, (3) how we are to respond, and (4) how it is “perfected” or comes to completion. Have them explain their images in whole-class discussion.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Since A, Then B” exercise from the activity page to groups to complete as indicated. When they are finished, allow time for groups to compare their responses. (*Option*: this exercise can be moved to follow other segments of this Into the Word segment; it can also be a transition or introduction to the Into Life section.)

Ask a volunteer to read 1 John 4:13-17. Distribute a triangle-shaped sheet of paper to each group. Ask groups to brainstorm three things God has done: one thing each by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Have groups write down one response in each corner of the triangle. These actions must be unique to the role of each (*example*: since the Bible describes both the Son and the Holy Spirit as “advocate,” that one can’t be used).

Challenge groups to make their case either in terms of physical evidence (something that can be seen, touched, or both) or consistent testimony from several people.

After a few minutes, reconvene for a whole-class discussion as groups present their case. Be prepared to show how the proposals connect to 1 John 4:13-17.

Into Life

Have learners partner up. Refer back to 1 John 2:6 and ask partners to work together to make a list of three or more habits that Jesus practiced personally (example: He took time away from the crowds to be alone to pray, Matthew 14:23). Challenge partners to think of practical ways they can adopt these same habits personally in the week ahead. Request that learners be ready to reflect on their experience in this regard when the class next meets.