

Speaking for the Defense

Letters of John, Part 3

I John 2:1-2

I'll never forget one of our global staff members, serving in Eastern Europe at the time, telling me about an event he witnessed at the British Museum.

He and his family were visiting the Museum along with hundreds if not thousands of people as usual – from all around the world. They were crowded in front of displays and roaming the aisles.

If you've ever visited you are literally stunned by the artifacts dating back thousands of years. You can see the huge bulls with folded wings, carved out of stone that stood in the palace entrance, through which Jonah himself entered.

You can see wall tiles bearing images that Daniel saw with his own eyes as he entered the capitol city of Babylon; there are statues from Egypt that Moses would have seen as a boy.

It's just amazing to see what God has preserved to validate the record of scripture.

He and his family were there at the museum because they had the unique opportunity to actually see the display of an ancient Greek manuscript – the Alexandrinus. This was a manuscript which had been given to King Charles I of England in the 17th century.

The British Museum had announced that it would be displaying this ancient manuscript of God's word. There they stood looking at this copy of the New Testament that was 15 centuries old.

But he said to me, "Stephen, the really tragic thing about this display was that it was virtually ignored. We were the only people who stood there looking at it. In fact, there was a crowd of people all frenzied to get past our display to another display which held original copies of music autographed by the Beatles. That display got all the attention."

I mean, why look at an ancient copy of a letter from God when you can look at a musical score signed by Lennon?

But that's really not a surprise is it?

To the world at large, the idea that God has spoken to mankind through His word, doesn't really get much press.

It doesn't really get all that much pizzazz out of people.

But for those of us who believe in Christ, this book is indeed the words of life.

We treasure it, don't we?

I have in my study at home a gift from the president of a missionary agency; it's an original page out of the 1611 Kings James Version, framed in glass. It's actually hard to read because of all the changes in the English language over the centuries and the spelling of English words. The letter "F" is used in place of the letter "S" as an example. My framed page is from the Gospel of Luke and it amazes me to own a page from a Bible more than 400 years old.

I also have in my study at home – just across the room – a small piece of notebook paper also framed in glass where a Chinese believer has written down their own translation of scripture into Mandarin. And they did it because they didn't own their own Bible – I mean, this was it.

This page was also given to me as a gift once the owner received a copy of the Bible in his own language. But that page serves to remind me of the treasure of the word – and the courage and the love of believers around the world who long to hold it and to read it and to learn it; who know it is the words of life.

It challenges me to never take this Book for granted.

Without it we would never conceive of God's atoning work on our behalf.

Without it we would be left in our blindness to grope after God – Paul said to the Athenians in Acts 17.

The world is incurably religious and desperately attempting to deal with its intuitive sense of sin.

In fact, recently an estimated 20 million pilgrims bathed in the polluted waters of the Ganges River believing its waters to be the nectar of immortality, representing a goddess who could forgive their sins; believing that on certain dates in January and February, every so many years, they are most likely to receive a spiritual cleansing from their sins.

It's the largest religious gathering on the planet – and twenty million is probably way too low an estimate.

The Bible contains God's remedy for sin – from the Garden of Eden to the 21st century; it isn't water, it's blood; it isn't a river, it's a cross; it isn't a goddess whom no one has seen or heard; it's the Son of God who came to be seen and to be heard.

And John the Apostle can't quite get over the fact that he has the privilege of delivering through his letters, the words of that living Lord . . . the words of everlasting Life.

- He says in **1 John 1 and verse 4** that his letter is going to bring joy;
- He says in **chapter 2 and verse 12** that his letter was written to clearly inform us that our sins have been forgiven for Christ's sake;
- He says in chapter 2 and verse 26 that his letter is intended to protect us from false teaching;
- He says in **chapter 5 and verse 13** that this letter is being written so that we can have absolute assurance of heaven when we die.

Left alone, we would be forever wandering; forever gullible; forever fearing to stand in the presence of whatever God we might have created. And John would say . . . “No, No, No . . . that's exactly why I've written down for you these words from God – God has spoken – you have nothing to fear at all.”

How in the world can that be true?

John would say, let me tell you how – **chapter 2 and verse 1 – notice – My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.**

Let's uncover the treasure of these words from God.

The first thing John alludes to is our direction in life.

Our Direction in Life

Notice again, **My little children, I am writing these things to you . . .**

You'll notice he's writing to believers.

And 7 times in this letter, this 80 year old Apostle will use this expression of endearment – my little children.ⁱ

No doubt many of them had come to faith under his ministry, there in Ephesus.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.

You see, from what John has just taught us about the ongoing cleansing flow of the blood of Christ on our behalf, the believer might be led to fall into the false teachers trap and come to the conclusion that sinning isn't that big of a deal after all.

I mean, come on, we're under grace . . . lighten up . . . loosen up . . . live a little.

You're forgiven.

John quickly adds here . . . “No . . . listen, I'm writing to you so that you may not sin . . . so that you steer clear of sin . . . so that you avoid sin.”

Another error of interpretation would be to say, as some have, that John is teaching sinless perfection.

That a Christian can arrive at a place where he's sinless.

John writes, “so that you – what – so that you may not sin.”

John isn't encouraging Christians to never sin again; John is encouraging Christian to not want to sin again.

He isn't encouraging our perfection . . . he's encouraging our direction . . . in life.

And our direction is away from sin – we want to avoid sin . . . our daily prayer is, “Lead us away from temptation . . . why? . . . because we have come to hate sin and love the Savior whom we want to obey.”

One author pointed out three ascending motives for obedience. Fear . . . duty . . . love.

Obeying because we have to – that's fear;

Obeying because we need to – that's duty;

Obeying because we want to – that's love.

A slave obeys because he has to – out of fear.

An employer obeys because he needs to – out of duty; he might even dislike his job, but he needs his paycheck.

But a Christian obeys because he wants to – out of love.ⁱⁱ

This is how we learned to obey as children.

We first learned to obey because we had to, right; fear of punishment. The fear of being spanked outweighed the act of disobedience.

We learned to obey to avoid that.

There was a bush just outside our kitchen door from which my mother could easily get fresh switches to spank her 4 sons. We prayed that this bush would die . . . it flourished.

My mother asked me a couple of months ago – “How come whenever you mention some childhood memory, we were usually giving you a spanking.”

Because . . . that was my childhood . . . and I evidently was a slow learner . . . it took me a while to learn that saying, “I can’t help it,” didn’t work.

You see, John doesn’t want us to come to the point in chapter 2 where we say, “You know, we just can’t help it.”

He is neither teaching perfection *from* sin, nor an obligation *to* sin – as if we can’t help it . . . because we now can.

I love the illustration of this truth, pulled from history by Donald Grey Barnhouse, a former long-time pastor from Philadelphia who influenced so many people, including one of his young interns by the name of Howard Hendricks.

Barnhouse often gave this analogy to explain why a Christian may sin, but doesn’t have to sin.

He said that the crew of a large sailing vessel once had a captain literally lose his mind during one of their voyages. He lost touch with sanity and they didn’t know what to do, other than lock him in a safe place on board throughout the remainder of their voyage.

According to custom, the first mate immediately became the new captain of the vessel. From that moment onward, the old captain had no authority over the men or the ship.

Problem was, the old captain didn’t agree. And from his confined quarters he would constantly bark out orders to members of the crew. He’d scream and yell and make such a fuss that it was easy to become distracted.

And even though the crew was naturally inclined to obey his voice, they had to teach themselves that, no matter what he commanded, that he had absolutely no authority in their lives . . . he no longer had to be obeyed.

Barnhouse then made the analogy that fallen nature, temptation and the devil himself are like that old captain. They may keep on shouting out orders – but they’ve been stripped of any real authority over us.

We may obey them, but we don’t have to.

The past is now powerless . . . the enemy has binding authority over us any longer.

So the believer now trains himself to listen to the voice of his new Captain – Jesus Christ – and ignore the insane, old Captain’s and refuse to obey him.ⁱⁱⁱ

My little children, I’m writing you these things so that you understand that you no longer have to sin.

And John immediately anticipated his spiritual children saying, “That’s wonderful, but what happens when we listen to the voice of that old Captain . . . what happens when we choose to sin . . . you’ve already told us in the previous paragraph that Christ’s blood continually cleanses us and that we’re to confess to Him specific sins . . . but, will there ever come a time when God will say, “Enough’s enough?!” Would He ever kick us off His ship?”

Notice the ***very next phrase in verse 1b. I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.***

And if anyone sins – now watch this – Greek students will appreciate me pointing out that this construction is what we call a third class condition;

John is literally writing, “If anyone sins and it will happen.”^{iv}

You could translate it to capture this third class condition – ***And when anyone sins*** – you might write in the margin of your Bible the word “***when***” next to the word “***if***”.

And when anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father.

In this first verse, John not only reinforces our direction in life – but he reveals our defense in heaven.

Our Defense in Heaven

We have an advocate with the Father.

All I want to do is make five observations about our defense – which eternally secures our destiny.

Number 1: Our defense is unrelenting

We ***have*** an advocate. Not, we wish we had an advocate – or we used to have an advocate but He jumped ship.

We ***have*** – present tense – the ongoing, unrelenting, never ending – the advocacy of Christ.

And by the way, don’t miss John’s pronoun choice – We have an advocate.

Even the faithful Apostle now in his 80’s needed an advocate.

I’m so glad John included himself, because you might not think he’s in the same boat.

But he is.

We have . . . an advocate.

This is the language of a courtroom.

And we automatically think of the lawyer, called for the defense of the accused, who stands alongside his client in court.^v

Oh but this is so much more than that.

You might be tempted to think that John is speaking of a court appointed attorney. An attorney who might not know you – who might not care as deeply as you do about your future – but you don't have the money for your own attorney, much less a defense team – and so you can only hope that the court appointed attorney does his job.

But that's not John's idea here. In the law courts of the New Testament times, the advocate had a longstanding relationship with the client – most often tied by family descendants.

One New Testament scholar pointed out the glorious fact that the advocate in John's generation was not merely a hired pleader of one's cause, he was the patron and standing counsel of the defendant; he was [most likely] the head of the clan to which they both belonged; bound together by the claims of honor [for the sake of the family name.]^{vi}

An advocate wasn't simply defending your cause – He was effectively defending the honor of His family name.

That's the idea here . . . you have an advocate. And He's related to you . . . He's the head of the clan; and He's going to do everything in His power to defend the sacredness of your Family name.

By the way, you need to know that this word translated *Advocate* is the noun *parakletos* (παρακλητος).

It's the same title given to the Holy Spirit where it is translated Comforter or Helper (John 14:16).

Both the Holy Spirit and Jesus have similar roles, but in different locations, so to speak. Even though they are equally omnipresent deity, Jesus defines their roles in terms of geography for the sake of emphasis.

He said to His disciples, that when He ascended the Holy Spirit would descend, indwelling and anointing and teaching them.

The Holy Spirit is God's Advocate for us on earth; Jesus is our advocate in heaven; the Holy Spirit makes intercession from within us (*Romans 8:26*) on earth; Jesus Christ is making intercession on behalf of us in heaven (*John 17*).

That's what you call being covered.

And we need that kind of coverage from our advocate because we have an accuser.

He is the biggest tattler the universe has ever known. You thought your little sister was a tattler . . . or your little brother. They're not even in the same ballpark.

And the frightening thing about it – which these first century believers were concerned about – is that the accuser, Satan, doesn't even have to make stuff up.

It's probably the only time Satan ever tells the truth.

He doesn't have to lie about us . . . all he has to do is tell God the truth about us.^{vii}

And we daily give him more to tattle on.

I can still remember as a 10 or 11 year old, sitting near the back row in church one Sunday. We had wooden theater seats that sat about a 7-800 people, maybe more. My three brothers and I had to sit with our parents, so I don't know how I ended up sitting with my friends in the back, but life was good.

I was in the back with several other boys, talking and passing notes – about the content of the sermon of course – comparing outlines – this was a formal church, by the way . . . dignified, stately pastor, robed choir, pipe organ;

Suddenly, the pastor – Dr. Dunlap – stopped in the middle of his sermon, pointed back in our direction, and quietly but firmly said, "Sonny boy" and then went back to preaching. After church, my parents wanted to know if my name was "Sonny boy".

Of course it wasn't me . . . but it was . . . hopefully none of 'em would tattle on me . . . and they didn't, God is merciful and good.

The truth is, we're all in deeper trouble than we can even conceivably imagine . . . why? Because the kingdom of darkness misses nothing.

And it never fails to point the finger.

The accuser says, "Did you see that . . . did you see that . . . did you hear that? Now whaddya going to do? Kick 'em off the boat!"

No, I am their Advocate!

His defense is unrelenting.

Number 2: Our defense is unrestricted.

One of the terribly irritating things to the accuser is that he can never tell the Father anything about us He doesn't already know.

Notice here in *verse 1 again – we have an Advocate – notice this – with the Father.*

John used this same phrase in *chapter 1, verse 2* to speak of the Jesus' pre-incarnational relationship with God the Father – it was face to face; and now here in *chapter 2 and verse 2* John uses it to refer to the post-resurrection relationship of Jesus *with the Father.*^{viii}

Again . . . it's intimate communion . . . literally, face to face.

Our defense counsel knows the Judge! He has unrestricted access to the Father's inner chamber.

And just what do you think Jesus is saying to the Father about us in there?

Do you think He's saying,

"Look, Father, they're innocent down there."

"Father, there were extenuating circumstances beyond their control."

"They were trapped and tricked and I think we ought to just never-mind."^{ix}

He can't say any of that, can He?!

Why? Because He can only tell the truth.

In other words – get this – He agrees with the accuser.

Our Defense Attorney does not maintain our innocence; He actually acknowledges our guilt.^x

Why would He do that?

Because our Advocate is not only unrelenting and unrestricted; His, thirdly,

3. Our defense is untarnished

As if John thinks we might not know who he's talking about, he adds, *we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*

The adjective "righteous" without a definite article points, not to His identity, but to His character.

Our Defense attorney is righteous. He is unsullied; He doesn't do backroom deals; He can't be bribed;

He never resorts to anything crooked to get His client off the hook with the judge.^{xi}

Which means He can't advance a defense while at the same time knowing it isn't the truth.

And so all the while the accuser is pointing his finger at us, Jesus Christ simply says to the Father, "He's right, you know."

Yes, he did that . . . yes, he said that . . . yes, I saw him do that too . . . Oh how tragic, I saw that too. Oh how offensive – how blasphemous . . . how

cruel . . . how insensitive . . . how wicked . . . how self-centered . . . yes, you're right – he's guilty!

What kind of defense attorney is He?

I'll tell you – He is unrelenting, unrestricted, untarnished and:

Number 4: He is undefeatable

Verse 2. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

He Himself is the satisfaction for our sins.

This word, propitiation, hilasmos (ἱλασμος) – means satisfaction.^{xii}

He has satisfied the wrath and holy requirement of God – for the wages of sin is what? Death.

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, this word hilasmos was used to describe the mercy seat – the lid on the Ark of the Covenant, upon which the High Priest would sprinkle the blood there in the Holy of Holies once a year.

Inside that ark – that golden box – were the tablets of law, given to Moses by God; the law had been broken, repeatedly, but God would choose to view the broken law through the blood sprinkled on that mercy seat.

So also, we have broken the law – but we have accepted the blood of Jesus on the cross as our covering; and God the Father chooses to view us through the blood sacrifice of His Son on our behalf.

Notice how John emphasizes this point – *verse 2, "For He Himself is the propitiation – the satisfaction for our sins."*

He is not only our Defense Attorney, He is the One who paid our sentence of death and separation.

Christ not only pleads for us; He exchanged places with us.^{xiii}

He *Himself* satisfied the payment for our sins, but note in *verse 2, John adds – but also for the sins of the whole world.*

I've read commentators who've tried to say that this means Jesus paid for the sins of all the Christians living in Ephesus, but also for all the sins of all the Christians living around the world; in other words, that Christ's atonement was only for Christians. And in an effectual way it was.

John never uses the phrase, "*the world*" to refer to Christians living all around the world; he uses it to refer to non-Christians who represent the world.

John writes here that the cross of Christ not only paid for our sins, but for the sins of *the whole world.*

The atonement of Jesus Christ is both unlimited and limited.

Is John advancing universalism – the belief that everyone gets into heaven after all? No.

But he is teaching that the atonement of Christ is unlimited in its potential and resulting invitation to all who haven't believed; but it is certainly limited in its effectual work in the lives of those who do believe.

Theologians would explain it this way: Christ's death is *efficient* to pay for the sins of those who believe; and *sufficient* to pay for the sins of the whole world.^{xiv}

What John is also suggesting here is that for the believer and also for anyone, anywhere in the world who is yet an unbeliever, the plan of salvation remains the same.

No one comes to the Father except through Him (**John 14:6**); no one finds satisfaction from the penalty of sin except through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ (**Romans 5:9**)

The freedom from the penalty of sin is *actual* for the believer; it is *available* for the unbeliever.

So it isn't one plan for us in the western world, but for the Hindu bathing in the Ganges River trying to wash away his sin, God says, "Well for him, I'll be *satisfied* by dirty river water."

No, it's the same plan for anyone, anywhere in the entire world.

Which means there's only one defense . . . there's only one name under heaven – whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12); there's only one Advocate who stands before the Father.

There is only One who can satisfy the claims of a broken law and a record of sin against you;

There is only One standing between you and Hell – it happens to be the God-man, Jesus Christ, the righteous Advocate.

And listen . . . He has never lost a case yet . . . did you hear me? He has never lost a case yet!

The accuser will say, "But just look at you!" John the Apostle says, "But just look at Christ."

Robert Murray McCheyne, the Scottish pastor in the 1800's used to remind his congregation and encourage them by saying, "For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Jesus Christ."^{xv}

The hymn writer put it this way:

*When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end to all my sin
Because the sinless Savior died*

*My sinful soul is counted free
For God the just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me
To look on Him and pardon me*

Will Jesus ever tire of defending us?

The readers of this letter would have wondered – John knew they were wondering what to do about sinning against a holy God.

Will Jesus ever tire of us? Will He ever say of one of us, at some point, "For goodness sake, not him again!"

What kind of assurance do we have that we won't get dropped?

A couple of years ago I had several claims on my automobile insurance. On my pick-up truck; on my car . . . I had been in a minor accident in my truck – it was my fault; one of my kids got into an accident with a city bus – and the bus won that argument; it was about the third time in a year I made out a claim.

And then I got a letter from my insurance company telling me they were reviewing my case and I might get dropped because of the multiple claims.

I made the startling realization that insurance companies really only wanted people who didn't make any claims. I thought that was what I had been making deposits toward all these years.

How simple can I be? Those payments meant nothing.

In fact, not too long ago I was reading one author who was actually dropped by his insurance company for similar reasons.

He ended up turning the letter from his insurance company around and imagining what it would have sounded like had it come from the Lord's office staff in response to multiple claims for forgiveness.

Dear Sir,

We're writing in response to this morning's request for forgiveness.

We are sorry to inform you that you have reached your quota of sins. Our records show that, since employing our services, you have erred multiple times in the same area and have a tendency to repeat the same misjudgments. At the same time we've noted that your prayer life is substandard when compared to others of similar age and circumstance.

Further review reveals that your understanding of doctrine is in the lower 20 percentile and you have excessive tendencies to procrastinate; because your sins have exceeded the norm of high-risk claims, you can certainly understand that forgiveness has its limits. With that in mind, Jesus sends His regrets and kindest regards and hopes you'll find some other form of coverage because ours is now suspended.^{xvi}

Ladies and Gentlemen, when you join the family of God, you are guaranteed permanent coverage; your claims are met by an unrelenting defender; you find in Him unrestricted access to the Father; He has an untarnished, unsullied character; and listen – you find in Him an undefeatable record of defense.

He has never lost a case . . . He will not lose yours!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/27/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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i D. Edmond Hiebert, The Epistles of John (BJU Press, 1991), p. 71

ii Warren W. Wiersbe, I John: Be Real (David C. Cook, 1972), p. 45

iii Adapted from Lawrence Richards, The Teacher's Commentary (Victor Books, 1987), p. 818

iv John MacArthur, 1-3 John (Moody Publishers, 2007), p. 45

v Herschel H. Hobbs, The Epistles of John (Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 40

vi Roy L. Laurin, First John: Life at its Best (Kregel, 1987), p. 51

vii John Phillips, Exploring The Epistles of John (Kregel, 2003), p. 41

viii Hiebert, p. 73

ix Joel Beeke, The Epistles of John (Evangelical Press, 2006), p. 52

x MacArthur, p. 44

xi Hiebert, p. 74

xii Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 786

xiii Phillips, p. 42

xiv Phillips, p. 43

xv Sam Gordon, Living in the Light: 1, 2, 3 John (Ambassador, 2001), p. 60

xvi Adapted from preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2012/October/6102212.html