
The Meaning of Walking "in the Darkness" (1 John 1:6)

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In 1 John 1:6 the Apostle John wrote that an individual does not have fellowship with God if he is walking "in the darkness." "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth." Walking in the darkness is generally understood to refer to a person who is currently sinning. As Bruce states, "light is a synonym of goodness and truth, while 'darkness' is a synonym of evil and falsehood."¹ Dodd also voices this majority interpretation when he states,

Light is for him primarily the symbol of sheer goodness; darkness, of moral evil. If then God is altogether good, without any trace of evil, it follows that we cannot have fellowship with Him without being good in our degree. . . . To be within the light, then—that is to say, to be in union with God—means to lead a good life, since God is good. This is the true basis of fellowship in the Church. It is a society of people who, believing in a God of pure goodness, accept the obligation to be good like Him.²

This view of walking in the darkness is so prevalent that while both sides of the current lordship salvation debate disagree on much, they concur on this definition. They hold that a person who is walking in the darkness is involved in some individual³ sin.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Basingstoke: Pickering & Inglis, 1983), 34.

² C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 19-20.

³ The adjective "individual" is added to differentiate between the general sin nature or sins in general (most commentators acknowledge the existence of the sin nature and some degree of general sin in the believer) and the presence of a continuing, unconfessed sin. Individual sins are those committed by a supposed believer.

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Those who oppose lordship salvation and who emphasize grace,⁴ teach that the sin of a believer causes a temporary disruption in his or her relationship with God.⁵

John knew, as does every perceptive pastor, that Christians sometimes feign spirituality while *engaging in acts of disobedience*. . . . A Christian who says he is in fellowship with God (who "is Light") but is *disobeying Him* (walking "in the darkness") is lying. Ten times John used darkness to refer to *sin* (John 1:5; 3:19; 12:35 [twice]; 1 John 1:5-6; 2:8-9, 11 [twice]).⁶

Lordship salvation⁷ advocates agree that walking "in the darkness" means the occurrence of "continual sin," but they differ by concluding that the person was never saved.⁸

The apostle John also wrote an entire epistle about the marks of a true believer. . . . He gave them . . . a moral test. . . . The moral test requires obedience: "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth" (1 John 1:6). . . . The one who is truly saved cannot continue in a pattern of unbroken sin.⁹

Thus the prevailing view is that walking "in the darkness" indicates that an individual is committing acts of sin. This article proposes the view that in John's writings walking "in the darkness" never means performing acts of sin. Instead it means abiding in death by rejecting God's message of eternal life through Christ.

After reviewing obvious problems with identifying "darkness" as sin, the article presents a definition of "light" and "darkness" from the Gospel of John. Then a study of the context of 1 John 1:6 also identifies John's meaning of "darkness." A survey of the remainder of 1 John provides validation for this view.

"Darkness" as Sin: Problem Passages

Several problems exist when "darkness" is defined as sin and "light" is defined as righteousness.

⁴ "Grace" is used here to designate those who believe that salvation is purely by the grace of God, that is, one must only "believe." There is no commitment to righteous living required for salvation, nor are visible works necessary indicators of salvation.

⁵ Fellowship is restored by confession (1 John 1:9). Thus walking in the darkness is a sanctification issue.

⁶ Zane Hodges, "1 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, 2 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1978), 2:885. The passages stated use the term "darkness" but do not define it.

⁷ Lordship salvation adherents maintain that commitment to Jesus as Lord (Master) is a requirement of salvation. The most prominent advocate of this view is John MacArthur (*The Gospel according to Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988]). He holds that a believer can be identified by his good works and that lack of these good works marks a person as an unbeliever.

⁸ Thus walking in the darkness is a soteriological issue.

⁹ MacArthur, *The Gospel according to Jesus*, 219.

"DARKNESS":¹⁰ A PROBLEM PASSAGE

In John's Gospel "darkness" is used five times in a figurative sense¹¹ (1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:35; 12:46). None of these passages defines "darkness."¹² While "sin" may seem to be a synonym for darkness in most passages, in at least one of them "sin" is a questionable replacement: "And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil [*πρωτηρά*]" (3:19).

If "sin" is substituted for "darkness," then the argument seems redundant: "men loved sin . . . for their deeds were evil." Paraphrased, this would read, "Men loved sin because they sinned."¹³

"LIGHT": PROBLEM PASSAGES

"Darkness" is the absence of "light." Those who define "darkness" as sin also define "light" as righteousness or goodness. However, "light" in the Gospel of John is never defined as righteousness or goodness. Instead "light" is defined as life. "In Him was life; and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4).¹⁴ This is not physical life, but life with the Father, for the believer is "born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (1:13). This life is eternal (3:16). "And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (17:3). Obviously "light" does not mean righteousness or goodness.

THE "WORLD": THE FIRST CREATION

In John's writings the term "world" is synonymous with the first creation.¹⁵ It (i.e., the material creation and mankind) was "made by Him" (John 1:3, 10), yet because mankind rejected God, "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19) and is "passing away" (1 John 2:17). Satan is the prince of this world (John 12:31; 16:11; 1 John 5:19).

¹⁰ All uses of "darkness" in John are *σκοτία* except for John 3:19, which has *σκότος*.

¹¹ *Σκοτία* is used literally in John 6:17 and 20:1.

¹² John 8:12, however, does define "light."

¹³ Most authors here do not state it quite that simply. Quite often they define "darkness" in this verse, not as sin, but as the place where righteousness does not exist. However, for all practical purposes, that place is "sin."

¹⁴ John 8:12 makes a similar identification of light and life: "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

¹⁵ By "world" did John mean the material creation, mankind, or both? Sometimes "world" means the material creation (John 21:25), but most frequently it focuses on the people in it (e.g., 1:10; 3:16). This latter use of "world" in John is a metonymy of the subject (E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* [reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968]), 576).

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"THE NEW LIFE": THE SECOND CREATION

The only hope for the dying world was a new creation (John 1:4, 9-11; 3:3), a life not like the dying physical life, but a life generated by God (1:13; 1 John 5:1). Jesus brought this new life into the world.¹⁶ It was with the Father (John 1:1; 5:26; 1 John 1:2), is in Jesus (John 1:4), and is imparted to those who receive Him (1:12-13). Believers then are considered to be a part of the new, nonphysical creation (1:12-13; 3:3-8), no longer of this world (1:10-12; 17:9, 14). They possess "eternal" life (3:16).

The world¹⁷ rejected Jesus (1:11), the supplier of new life. The Pharisees believed their self-righteousness made them sinless (John 9:41; 15:22, 24).¹⁸ In the Law they claimed to have found life (5:39). However, the Law contained life only in its anticipation of the new life in the Messiah (Deut. 18:15; 30:6; John 5:39, 46). Jesus' revelation of eternal life through Himself contradicted the Pharisees' theology of sinlessness (John 15:22, 24),¹⁹ so they rejected His revelation.

LIGHT IN THE FIRST CREATION AND THE NEW CREATION

The original creation was the setting for the second creation. John began his Gospel with the words "In the beginning" (1:1) and discussed Jesus' part in the original creation. Then in verse 4 John pointed out that just as in Genesis literal light came into the dark chaos, so in the second creation the revelation of new life came into the dark sinful world (John 1:1-13). This "life," which Jesus brought from the Father (5:26; 1 John 1:2) to give to men (John 1:12-13), is the light. "The life was the light of men" (1:4). Thus the "light" is the very life of God, brought from the Father into a dying world.

In John 17:2b-3 life (light) is defined further: "to all whom Thou has given Him, He may give eternal life. And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent." It is impossible to know God without having the

¹⁶ Besides "bringing" new life, Jesus revealed it in His words. Thus any statement about this new life includes the revelation of that life. When the Pharisees rejected the "life," they rejected Jesus' revelation of it. The word of revelation through Jesus and the fact of eternal life are inseparable (John 5:24).

¹⁷ In John's Gospel the world is represented by the Pharisees.

¹⁸ The Pharisees felt they had forgiveness of sins through their following the demands of the Old Testament. They believed they had "no sin." John's argument is similar to that in the Book of Hebrews; the blood of bulls and goats never took away sins (Heb. 10:1-4). The New Covenant provides the forgiveness of sins (Jer. 31:34).

¹⁹ "Eternal life" and "forgiveness of sins" are inseparable. If a person has one, he has the other. The promised New Covenant included both a new heart (Deut. 30:6; Ezek. 36:26) and forgiveness of sins (Jer. 31:34).

very life (light) of God.²⁰ Since Jesus is the revelation of the Father (John 14:6-9), without Jesus and His word there is no possibility of knowing God.²¹

As life (light) reveals the Father to man, so the absence of light, or darkness, indicates the state (death) wherein man does not know God. This was the scene before the original creation (no light) and this was the state of the world before Jesus entered it (no life). People in the world remain in darkness (death) because of rejecting Him. Therefore those who "love darkness rather than light" are those who reject the revelation of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF "SIN" TO LIGHT (ETERNAL LIFE)

As stated earlier, the Pharisees claimed they had "no sin" (John 9:39-41) and that they had life without Jesus (5:39). But Jesus revealed to them just the opposite—they were sinners and they had no spiritual life.

Their problem was one of revelation. Jesus revealed God's plan of eternal life and the removal of sin. Those who accept that revelation agree with God concerning their sin. Those who reject that revelation are thereby claiming self-righteousness. It is not a question of whether one is good,²² but whether one will accept God's revelation and His offer of eternal life. This is precisely the thought related in John 3:19-21: "And this is the judgment, that the light [the revelation of eternal life through Jesus Christ] is come into the world, and men loved the darkness [the death of the old creation, void of the new life revealed in Christ] because their deeds were evil."

Many whose deeds are exposed by the revelation (light), reject the light, preferring to live as they did before that revelation. "Jesus said, 'For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind. Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, 'We are not blind too, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, "We see," your sin remains'" (9:39-41). Blindness (darkness) is not sin; it is the absence of God's revelation. Jesus had healed the blind man, enabling him to see the light. The Pharisees claimed they could see apart from Jesus,

²⁰ John's point is that on their own those in the dying world cannot know God. God alone can provide life which reveals Him in all His perfection.

²¹ As the revelation of the Father (John 1:18) Jesus is called the Word (1:1). He communicates the Word of the Father and speaks that Word to men. Those who hear Jesus' Word and believe have the eternal life of the Father (John 5:24, 26; 1 John 1:1-5). Thus the revelation of the Father (the Word) and the content of that revelation (eternal life) are inseparably linked. To receive the words of Jesus is to receive eternal life. To reject the words of Jesus is to be void of eternal life.

²² This is the common view, that walking in darkness is performing sinful deeds.

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and so their sin remained. Jesus explained, "If I had not come and *spoken* to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse [*πρόφασιν*, "cloak"] for their sin" (15:22). Those who reject God's revelation of light (new life), "walk in darkness."

In summary light is eternal life (1:4) by which man knows God. This life is the very life of God provided through Jesus Christ to the believer (John 5:25-26). He who "walks in the light," then, is one who receives the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Darkness is the absence of the light, the absence of eternal life. Darkness, in other words, refers to spiritual death. Since eternal life is knowing God, not having eternal life is not knowing God; it is walking "in the darkness." One who walks in the darkness rejects the revelation through Jesus Christ, since life (light) is provided only through Him and His words.

The Use of Light and Darkness in 1 John 1:5-6

It is imperative that walking in the darkness also be defined from the context of 1 John 1:6.

"GOD IS LIGHT": THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF 1:1-5

The meaning of the words "walk in the darkness" (1 John 1:6) depends on the occurrence of "darkness" in verse 5. In turn the meaning of "darkness" hinges on the meaning of "God is light," also in verse 5: "And this is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth" (1 John 1:5-6).

John wrote that "the message" is that "God is light." This is the third of three parallel statements about the message. The first two (nonfigurative) statements help identify the meaning of the third (figurative) statement.

	Direct Object	Subject and Verb	Indirect Object
1:1-2	"What we have heard . . .	we . . . proclaim (ἀπαγγέλλομεν)	to you. . . "
1:3	"what we have heard	we proclaim (ἀπαγγέλλομεν)	to you. . . "
1:5	"the message (ἀγγελία) we have heard . . .	we . . . announce (ἀναγγέλλομεν) ²³	to you. . . "

²³ The words ἀπαγγελλέω and ἀναγγελλέω are virtually synonymous (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. ἀγγελία, by Julius Schniewind, 1:60-67).

Since these three statements are almost identical, the "message . . . we have heard" (v. 5) is the same as "what we have heard" (vv. 1-2 and v. 3). What did John say they had heard? In 1:2 he wrote that they had heard about "the Word of life," and "the eternal life, which was with the Father."

Therefore the message "God is light" (v. 5) is that God is "life," as revealed through the Word of Life,²⁴ Jesus Christ (v. 1). This is similar to John 1:4, which identifies light as life. Since the concept of God being light means that He is life, "darkness," by contrast, means death.

WALKING IN LIGHT OR IN DARKNESS: THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF
1 JOHN 1:6-2:1

Having determined from 1:1-5 that "darkness" means "death" due to rejecting the revelation of Christ, it is important now to consider the phrase "walk in the darkness" (1:6) and its following context. Many have noticed the parallel structure in 1 John 1:6–2:1, characterized by alternating negative and positive "if" statements.

Having identified "light" as eternal life, John then wrote of whether it is possible to know God apart from that revelation. Verses 6, 8, and 10 refer to those who claim to have no sin, which is a denial of the revelation of God.²⁵ The negative parallels (1:6, 8, 10) are as follows:

	Condition	Conclusion
1:6	"If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in darkness,	we lie and do not practice the truth."
1:8	"If we say that we have no sin,	we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us."
1:10	"If we say that we have not sinned,	we make Him a liar and His word is not in us." ²⁶

The conclusions—"do not practice the truth," "the truth is not in us," "we make Him a liar and His word is not in us"—all refer to rejection of God's revelation, that is, His "truth" (and His "word").

²⁴ "Word of life" is John's way of emphasizing that the revelation of Christ is integral with "life."

²⁵ As in the Gospel of John the claim of "no sin" is contrary to the revelation of God. However, how could anyone claim to have "no sin"? Self-righteousness is the obvious answer (see *supra*, n. 18).

²⁶ Again rejecting the light means rejecting God's Word through Jesus Christ. It is characteristic of the world to want to change God's Word, since unbelievers follow their father, the devil, and his pattern in Genesis 3 (John 8:44; 1 John 3:8).

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By contrast 1 John 1:7, 9, and 2:1 mention those who believe the revelation of eternal life, those who accept the fact that their sin can be dealt with only by God's Son, Jesus Christ. These positive verses (1:7, 9; 2:1) are as follows:

	Condition	Conclusion
1:7	"If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light,	we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son, cleanses us from all sin."
1:9	"If we confess our sins,	He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."
2:1	"If anyone sins,	we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ."

These statements speak of those who have their sin removed in God's revealed way, namely, through Jesus Christ.

The parallels are clear. God has revealed that the world is dying. Man must accept God's revelation of eternal life, which includes the means of removing that sin.²⁷ The group in 1:6, 8, 10 rejects God's revelation of eternal life and claims to have no sin (self-righteousness). Those depicted in 1:7, 9, and 2:1 agree that they have sin, but they acknowledge that sin can be removed only by Jesus Christ.

The apostle's message, as recorded in 1 John 1:5, was that God is light, or that He is eternal life. Those who do not receive eternal life through Jesus Christ reject that revelation from God (light). They walk "in the darkness"; they do not believe His word.

Validations in 1 John

Throughout 1 John the apostle reaffirmed that the "message" (*ἀγγελία*, 1:5) is "eternal life" (light) in Christ. He also repeated his definition of "darkness," relating it to death and the lack of eternal life.

John's words in 2:25 are redolent of his emphasis on the "message" he "proclaimed," as stated in 1:1-5: "This is the promise (*ἐπαγγελία*) which He Himself promised (*ἐπηγγέλματο*) us: eternal life." Again it is clear that John's message was "eternal life."

In 1 John 1:2, John wrote that he and his readers had witnessed

²⁷ Again John was commenting on the revelation of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ, which included a new heart (Deut. 30:6; Ezek. 36:26) and forgiveness of sins (Jer. 31:34).

"eternal life": "the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness [*μαρτυροῦμεν*] and proclaim to you the eternal life." Then in 4:14 he related this to Jesus Christ: "And we have beheld and bear witness [*μαρτυροῦμεν*] that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world."

In 1 John 5:7, 11-12, the apostle also wrote of the witness of the Holy Spirit. "And it is the Spirit who bears witness [*μαρτυροῦν*]. . . . And the witness [*μαρτυρία*] is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life."

In 1 John 2:9, 11, walking "in the darkness" describes hating one's brother: "The one who hates his brother . . . walks in the darkness." In 3:14-15 John substituted "death" and lack of "eternal life" for walking "in the darkness." "He who does not love [his brother] abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him."

Therefore walking in darkness means abiding "in death" and not having eternal life abiding in one. The one who walks "in the darkness" is one who has rejected the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, eternal life (the light).

In summary walking "in the light" means receiving God's revelation of Himself through His Son, and receiving eternal life and forgiveness of sins. Walking "in the darkness," on the other hand, is walking in death, rejecting that revelation. "And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5:20).