



# THAT YOU MAY KNOW: A STUDY OF FIRST JOHN

## LESSON 3: “Assurance and the Sufficiency of Christ”

TEXT: 1 John 2:1–2

The apostle John began the body of his letter by emphasizing a cardinal truth of Christianity: “God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). With this truth in the spotlight, John proceeded to declare that any person who embraced the darkness—a life of dwelling in sin—was opposed to God and had no claim to salvation (v. 6). But a different tendency also had to be rejected. There were those who acknowledged God’s moral perfection and then claimed that they themselves were without sin—either because they had ascended to a higher plain of spirituality (v. 8) or because they were free from sin’s stain altogether (v. 10). Such people deceived themselves and made God a liar. Clearly, the right response to God’s purity is *not* to deny personal sin.

Rather, John emphasized that to be a true Christian means neither denying sin’s presence nor shying away from God’s holiness. To be a true Christian means coming into and walking in God’s revealing, purifying light (v. 7). The presence of sin to some degree will still be part of the Christian life. This sin will result in broken fellowship and the loss of assurance. But concealment of that sin out of fear, denial, or resignation, is never the right response. Instead, believers are exhorted to seek the forgiveness and cleansing they need to be restored to fellowship. This is to be done through open, direct, and accurate confession of sin to God (v. 9). Moreover, Christians are to be certain that such restoration is freely available because God’s Son Jesus gave His life as the once-for-all sacrifice for every sin that the redeemed will ever commit (v. 7). What words of assurance!

### 1 John 2:1–2 — “Assurance and the Sufficiency of Christ”

But such a profound message can easily lead to misapplication, and this is what the apostle John deals with in the next section of his letter—1 John 2:1–2.

“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; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for *those of the whole world*.”

Concerned that his readers would lower their vigilance against sin because of the forgiveness and restoration offered to them so freely, John immediately reiterates a major reason for his writing—to motivate them *not to sin* (v. 1a). But even here John recognizes the propensity to fall into the opposite error of believing that if sin is therefore committed, there is then no hope. In response, he again emphasizes the sufficiency of Christ’s work as an Advocate (v. 1b) and as the Atoning Sacrifice (v. 2). *Indeed, we are not to sin! But when we do, there is a precious remedy!* Holding these two truths at the same time, in appropriate tension, is fundamental for a right understanding of the assurance of salvation.

### I. The Sincere Petition (2:1b)

Signaling his intent to deliver important instruction, John begins with a special address: “My little children” (2:1a). To be called “children” is insulting to some, but it is not John’s intent to offend. Rather, his address is one of sincere spiritual affection which he will use six other times in the letter (2:12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). By the time he writes this letter (mid-80s AD), the apostle was probably in his 80s. Those to whom he wrote were long-term beneficiaries of John’s ministry. He looked upon them with the affection of a father—not merely with the authority of an apostle. To be called John’s “child” would have been a badge of privilege, not dishonor.

As part of this personal approach, John transitions to use the first-person singular pronoun: “I am writing” (2:1a). Although he previously cited the involvement of the broader community (“These things we write . . .” 1:4), now John wants his readers to know that it is he who is directly pleading with them.

Before he delivers this plea, John reminds his readers of the section he just finished. “These things” (2:1a) refers to the truths recorded in 1:5–10, including instruction on the holiness of God, the indisputable reality of

sin, the necessity of confession, and the freedom of God's forgiveness. Having established those truths, John wants to explain the correct reason for why he recorded them.

That clarification is found in the purpose statement of his writing: **"So that you may not sin"** (2:1a). Having just extolled the free and unconditional nature of God's forgiveness, John does not want his readers to arrive at a wrong application. ***Free, unlimited forgiveness must never be taken as a license for sin!*** Rightly understood, these truths lead to the opposite conclusion. John's words parallel the same logic expressed by Paul in Romans. After describing the unmerited nature of *justification* (God's declaration of a sinner as *legally* or *positionally* *righteousness* on the basis of mere faith in Christ), Paul also anticipated the argument that some would use to justify the practice of sin. Paul makes it clear that this is not the right conclusion: **Romans 6:1–2, 15.**

Correct thinking about the holiness of God, the reality of sin, the provision of confession, and the promise of forgiveness *does not allow* the Christian to respond casually to sin. **"May it never be!"** Despite the forgiveness and cleansing freely provided to restore the sinning Christian back into full fellowship, John reiterates to the major theme expressed in 1:5, "God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all" (1:5). This foundational theological axiom leads to an inescapable conclusion: "Sin is so heinous in the sight of God that it may not be indulged in even once" (Raymond Gingrich, *An Outline and Analysis of the First Epistle of John*, 55).

**"Every sin, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is an act of rebellion against the sovereign God who reigns and rules over us and as such is an act of treason against the cosmic King."**  
—R. C. Sproul

## II. The Sympathetic Provision (2:1b)

But as he did in the previous paragraph of 1:5–10, John acknowledges reality. Immediately after expressing his sincere desire that his readers avoid all sin, John indicates that there is nonetheless a provision for failure.

Although the NASB translation begins the sentence with **"And"** (2:1b), the conjunction is best understood as introducing a contrast in response to the petition of 2:1a, and so is better translated as **"but."** John's concession is then expressed in the simple conditional statement that follows: **"if anyone sins"** (v. 1b). John does not imply by the language here that the members of his audience were then at that moment committing sins. He states it instead as a hypothetical—a general principle, something that he acknowledges may very well happen, but not something he assumes as happening at present with respect to anyone in particular. What is that hypothetical? The act of committing *sin*. The term is the broadest word in the Bible's vocabulary for describing that which is contrary to God. It essentially means **"to miss the mark"** or **"to fall short"** of the standard of purity established by the God who is Light (1:5). John's language is intentionally general. He is stating a principle that has broad application. This is further expressed by his choice of the non-specific pronoun **"anyone."**

If this hypothetical condition occurs ("if anyone sins"), the conclusion is as follows: **"we have an Advocate"** (2:1b). What words of consolation! The use of the pronoun **"we"** tells us two things about John's thinking. First, it reaches back to his language earlier in v. 1, where he addressed his readers as "my little children"—i.e., Christians. Thus, John applies his words to everyone within this group of people without exception. Second, the pronoun **"we"** indicates that John included himself in this group. He needed this Advocate as well.

What does John mean by **"Advocate"** (παράκλητος, *paraklētos*)? The term is unique, appearing here and four times in John's Gospel where it is used to describe the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). In a basic sense the term refers to "one who is called to someone's aid," or "one who appears in another's behalf." But context is most important in defining this term further. When John uses it in his Gospel to describe the Holy Spirit, he uses it to emphasize the Spirit's ministry of *helping* or *comforting* the apostles in moments of special need. But when he uses the term here in 1 John 2:1, he employs it in the context of ***sponsoring or advocating someone before someone else***. This same idea is also found in some extra-biblical contexts, where the term described an "advocate" or "sponsor" who spoke on behalf of someone accused, particularly in courtroom settings.

John communicates this idea of *sponsorship* or *advocacy for sinners* by the words that follow in 2:1b. This "Advocate" is described in three ways:

- 1) He is **“with the Father”** – John describes this Advocate as One who stands *before or in the presence of* the Father, the God of Light—just as “the Word” was “in the beginning with God” (see John 1:1–2; 1 John 1:2).
- 2) His name is **“Jesus Christ”** – this Advocate is none other than the Incarnate One, the promised Suffering Servant, the One who is truly human *like us*—the perfect representative (see Heb 4:15–16).
- 3) He is known as **“The righteous [One]”** – this Advocate is completely without sin; He conforms perfectly to the standard of Light (see 1 John 1:5) and so is able to serve perfectly as an advocate. He is not stained by those whom He represents.

The believer who sins is not able on his own to appeal to the righteous Judge of the universe. His tears cannot advocate for him. His sorrow and regret cannot advocate for him. He cannot offer any merit of his own as compensation for the offense he has committed. But there is One who advocates willingly and perfectly! He is a sympathetic High Priest (Heb 4:15–16) who eagerly takes the side of the sinning believer and sponsors his appeal before the Judge. His name is Jesus Christ, and the Father always listens to Him: **Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25.**

John Calvin explained the thrust of 1 John 2:1b well when he wrote, “Christ’s intercession is the continual application of His death to our salvation. The reason why God does not impute our sins to us is because He looks upon Christ the intercessor.”

### III. The Sufficient Propitiation (2:2)

But John wants his audience to know that Jesus Christ is not only the perfect Advocate for believers who fall into sin. Even more fundamentally, Jesus Christ is the perfect, all-sufficient propitiation for sin through His once-for-all sacrifice on the cross.

To communicate this chief aspect of Jesus’ ministry, John uses the emphatic **“and He Himself”** in the beginning of 2:2. It is as if John is saying, “He Himself, and no one else!” No one else can function in this way but Jesus Christ. No one else is both righteous Advocate and satisfactory Atonement.

In particular, John states that Jesus Christ **“is the propitiation for our sins”** (v. 2a). Jesus does not merely *provide* propitiation. He *is* the propitiation! But what does this mean? The word **“propitiation”** (ἱλασμός *hilasmos*) is indeed rare, occurring only here and in 1 John 4:10 in the New Testament. At its root, the term means “to appease or satisfy an offended party.” It is far more specific than terms like “sacrifice” or “substitution.” It implies that Christ’s cross-work was needed for more than just the procurement of forgiveness for sinners. The righteous Judge of the universe also needed *satisfaction*.

This is *the problem*: sin not only estranges the sinner from God, but God from the sinner; “God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1:5). He must respond with wrath and exercise judgment against every act of unrighteousness. This is *the need*: sin must be justly punished, and God’s righteous wrath in response to those who commit it must be satisfied. But here is *the solution*: a sacrifice is offered—Jesus Christ, the righteous One—to pay the penalty for sins and bear the wrath of God to His satisfaction: **Isaiah 53:5; 11a.** As a result, there is now no condemnation: **Romans 8:1.**

Gary Derickson (*1, 2, and 3 John*, 129) states it well: “We are facing a justly angry Judge and stand guilty before him. Jesus’ role as our defender is not that of proving our innocence. Rather, he intercedes on our behalf before the righteous judge of the universe and turns back his wrath by satisfying this righteous demand for punishment. **He is both our defender and our sacrifice.**”

Robert Reymond (*A New Systematic Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 638) also writes, “In 1 John 2:1 the reference to Jesus as our Advocate before the Father when we sin, specifically in his character as the *Righteous One*, implies that the One before whom he pleads our cause—who represents the offended Triune Godhead—is displeased with us. Accordingly, the description of Jesus which immediately follows in 1 John 2:2 surely suggests that it is his advocacy before the Father specifically in his character as our *hilasmos*, which removes that divine displeasure.”

The significance of this propitiation is seen in John's final words: **"and not for ours only, but also for *those of the whole world*" (2:2b).** A superficial reading of "the whole world" could lead to the position of *universalism*—that Christ has paid the penalty for all men's sins and satisfied the wrath of God for each and every sinner. But this goes against John's own writing. For example, later in his letter John will still call the unsaved "the children of the devil" (3:10). In fact, in his Gospel, John states that God's "wrath" remains on everyone who has not been saved (John 3:36). Clearly, God's wrath has not been satisfied against all sin and every sinner. Hell is a reality.

Thus, it is important to note that John is not speaking here in 1 John 2:2 of the *extent* or *efficacy* of Christ's work of propitiation. Rather, he is speaking of its ***appropriateness*** for the whole world. That Christ is *the propitiation for sin* is a truth for all mankind, without distinction: **Acts 4:12.**

Explaining the error of the *universalist* position on 1 John 2:2, and advocating what is called the *particularist* view of Jesus' act of propitiation, John MacArthur and Richard Mayhe (*Biblical Doctrine*, 561) write,

First, the universalist accepts the superficial interpretation of "whole world" to mean "all without exception" and therefore modifies the propitiatory *nature* of the atonement to mean "a potential propitiation." . . . The second option is that of the particularist. The particularist . . . seeks a way to understand "whole world" that avoids doing violence to the grammar, context, and authorial intent of 1 John 1–2 and averts the problematic implications of universalism. Such a way is available. It is to understand "the whole world" to refer to "all without distinction" rather than "all without exception."

This reality about Christ—that He and He alone is the propitiation for sin—is not applicable *only to the Jews* (e.g., John and the other apostles, 1:4), or *only to John's original audience* ("my little children," 2:1). This reality about Christ is the solution to the sin and wrath problem *for everyone everywhere—without distinction!* There is no other option. This was an important assertion for John to make, since the false teachers of his day were claiming *secret knowledge* about fellowship with God that was only accessible to *some people*. In response, John proclaims the universal applicability of the gospel message. Only Jesus can save, and when He does, His propitiation is sufficient! This is the basis for true assurance.

**"I lay my sins on Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God; He bears them all, and frees us from the accursed load."  
— Horatius Bonar**

### For Discussion

1. Why is it important for John to exhort his audience *not to sin* in 1 John 2:1, immediately after precious truths about confession, forgiveness, and restoration? Why do we have the tendency to take these truths in the wrong direction? (Consider also Paul's words in Romans 6:1–2 and 6:15.)
2. In your own words, define the terms "Advocate" and "propitiation."
3. Explain what Jesus' role as Advocate entails. What is most amazing to you about this ministry of Jesus?
4. Why did Jesus' work of atonement need to achieve more than just the forgiveness of sin? What else was entailed?
5. Why is the topic of God's wrath avoided and even disdained?
6. When John states that Jesus is the propitiation of sin "for the whole world," some take this as proof of *universalism*. Why is this a serious error, and what is the correct understanding of the phrase in 1 John 2:2?

### For Further Study

1. **Memorize** 1 John 2:1 and Romans 8:34.
2. **Read** 1 John 1:1–2:2 once a day for the next week. **Read** John MacArthur & Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 528–31 (this section covers the doctrine of propitiation).
3. **Sing** "Before the Throne of God Above" (#187 in *Hymns of Grace*).

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at [www.gracechurch.org/motw](http://www.gracechurch.org/motw).

**Next meeting:** October 8, 7pm – "The Pillars of Marriage, Pillar 1" (Part 2 of the 2025–26 MotW mini-series)