

Running Into Danger

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[0 : 00] I will ask if you turn back to 2 John, and we will look at the first half of last Sunday evening before we celebrate the Lord's Supper together.

One of the important themes of the small letter is love and also truth, and John speaks about both of them. We know that truth is very important, because knowing the facts that we have in life affects our lives, doesn't it? Facts affect how we live.

Stupidly, I finished last week's sermon, crowing that Corrie would have the harder second half of this letter to preach on tonight, but I did not check the facts that Corrie was going to be a way preaching in a la pool this weekend, and I didn't check her preaching diary. I smugly got that wrong, and Corrie smugly sat thinking that he's got that wrong, and he wasn't having to preach that sermon.

We are looking at a slightly different aspect to what we looked at last week, where we spoke about the importance of love and loving one another in the truth. This comes to a slightly more difficult section, because he's dealing with people who have come into the church and who want to deny that truth. It is interesting, isn't it? The cry goes out today very much, what is truth? We live in a society where truth is very pliable. It's up for grabs.

The world you live in and the world I live in is a world where more than ever we can't speak about truth as being something that is exclusive and something that is revealed and something that can be known. We need to address that as believers. How do we address that as believers? How do we speak into our society? How do we speak into our community?

[2 : 15] How do we deal with those who don't believe the truth of the Bible or who don't see the truth of the Bible as being significant for them? Because the great deception very much today is that there isn't such a thing as absolute truth. You can't speak about absolute truth, at least not in moral terms, maybe in scientific and biological terms, maybe not so. But even today, so today we find that at best what we have is people declaring their own truth, my truth, being true to ourselves is what might, that is the, if we can talk about absolute truth, that is the absolute truth, being true to my own feelings to how I feel about myself. It's the ideology of expressive individualism coming out where the self is very much the high priest of this ironically fundamentalist religion. And no one can challenge anyone's personal right to self-identity in any kind of way. Someone can say that they're a barn door and you can't challenge that truth that they believe that they may be a barn door. And we do suspect when that's the case that the horse of truth has truly bolted from that particular situation. Yet we know also that self is important. It's not that we deny or decry the self. Self is very important. And we are created beings, created in the image of God. But the only true perspective that we can have of ourselves is through the lens of divine truth and through what John declares as being of primary importance when he speaks here.

But truth is something that is up for grabs today and we do ask the question, what is truth in a digitally imaged AI conquering age? Now, you may think you're unaffected by that as a Christian, but I suspect none of us are. I suspect it's a challenge we all face. Even when we come to the Bible, it's a challenge maybe we face. Maybe we look at the Bible and we say, well, there's some really difficult parts in the Bible. I'm sure it was applicable back in the day, but now not anymore. And we pull back from some of the truth that the Bible itself doesn't say is interpreted in another way. Or we look at what science has revealed to us today and the fact that there's a greater corpus of truth as it were today and it casts doubt on some of the truth of the Bible. Or maybe we're even tempted when we share our faith to say, well, this is what's true for me. This is what I've found to be true and it works for me, which is not false, but it maybe plays into that whole sense of self-expression and finding truth that fits and is convenient and works for me. It might not work for someone else, but it is true for me. Yet here, John is absolutely adamant, the Apostle John, that there's one irrefutable

truth for all people and it has massive implications.

And that's why this beloved Apostle, the Apostle of Love, the one who speaks more about love than anyone who was closer to Jesus in that way than any other disciple, he speaks so strongly against those who deny the truth that has been revealed through the apostolic foundation. And he obviously in verses one and two, he speaks a lot about truth. And then in verse seven, he declares what that fundamental truth is that he is so keen to defend against false teaching that has come into these early churches that denies this truth. He said, for many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus in the flesh, such a one as the deceiver and the Antichrist. So God, the Son, coming in the flesh, the incarnation of Jesus as God's Son is this irrefutable truth that can't be denied and can't be soft-soaked and can't be changed. And there's multiple truths that cascade from that particular fact of Jesus coming in the flesh.

And John is adamant as an apostolic witness that it's incontrovertible that if you lose that fact of the Son of God, the divine second person coming in the flesh, living, dying, being raised and ascended back to heaven, if we don't believe that God in Jesus Christ walked on this earth as a person, then we have moved from the foundation of Christianity.

We can't call ourselves Christians if that is not something that is fundamental to our understanding and our belief. It's what's declared in Scripture. It's what the focus of Scripture is. It's what all the gospels point towards. It's what the Old Testament prophesied. It's what the New Testament epistles look back to. It's evidence truth. It's lived-out truth. And it's truth that can be denied. People can be deceived from it.

[8 : 02] People can disbelieve it, but it's revealed for us as historical objective truth that is fundamental to our faith and to our understanding of ourselves, of God, of this world that we live in and of this salvation message. So in this truth that John is speaking about, he realizes a couple of things. Well, there's a couple of them, unstated realities that lie behind the statement that Jesus came in the flesh, and then he makes two statements about why that's so important. And the two unstated realities, if Jesus comes in the flesh and all the teaching that comes from that, it is the reality that sin is a personal and a universal disease that needed God the Son to come to deal with. That's the biblical diagnosis that we have of the world in which we live and of our own hearts before God. It is, don't remind us of this morning, and it's often what we repeat here. It's our distance from God. It's our rebellion against God. It's our turning our backs on God, our Creator, recognizing that from the beginning of Scripture. That is what kills us. That is what is killing us. Ultimately, it's not global warming. Global warming may well be happening. There may be many reasons behind that. But that is not the ultimate reality of what's destroying this world. Because death, according to the coming of Jesus Christ and the reason He came is a spiritual problem. And it's the reality that brings us into judgment from God, because death is what ultimately separates us from God of life. And that is why Jesus comes.

We have no answers to that. We have no answers to the... We have no ultimate answers to the atrophying of the created universe, nor do we have any ultimate answers to our own death.

The world we live in has much beauty and much amazing reality and much relationship and much love. But there's also deep, deep shadows, deep brutality, deep darkness, deep evil that we are unable to deal with. Not only in society, but in our own hearts, we recognize that. Now, we can be deceived to think otherwise. We can ignore that fact by just sticking our head in the sand and getting on with it, or we can attempt to self-solve that problem.

But Jesus coming is in response to what God has revealed is the problem for humanity and the problem for the universe. And so, this truth that God had to come on our behalf cannot be denied. It can't be minimized and regarded as insignificant. It's this desire for God to relate to these people who abandoned Him, who can't find a way back to Him because of their sin, that drove Jesus Christ into the womb of Mary, into the stable to become flesh, to live and experience a death like no other. And John knows that. John recognizes that Jesus coming in the flesh was so significant because His death is substitutionary and He experienced an infinitely dense punishment on that cross, on that three hours. He takes,

He subsumes, He takes all the sin of all His people and the wrath of God and the power of darkness and hell on that cross in our place. He becomes, He becomes our substitute.

[12 : 27] God becomes human in order to be a substitute on our behalf. And in His unique resurrection, back to life and love, He shares with all who believe in Him that same life and love.

And the question is, how we understand that, how we live that and how we share that today in a world that doesn't have the foundational truths? How do we do that? That's an important question that each of us need to ask ourselves. How do we take that truth and make that relevant in a society which maybe doesn't even begin with the foundation of believing in God in the first place? How do we get them to that place? And how do we share that truth meaningfully?

And we need to recognize that it would be a very strange message to make up. And that might be our starting point. Why would anyone make up this message?

So there's these two unspoken, as it were, fundamental realities that lie behind John saying that Jesus Christ came in the flesh and railing against those who denied that.

And so what He does, He says a couple of things. He says, in verse 8, watch yourselves so that you do acknowledge what we have worked for but win a full reward. And then He says in verse 9, everyone who goes ahead and does not abide in the teachings of Christ doesn't have God. Now we know that that was a message to that early church, family, house church probably in Ephesus, around Ephesus at the beginning of the New Testament. But it remains because of the living word of God, an ongoing and significant message for ourselves. To be vigilant, He says to us this evening, old Christians, young Christians, new Christians, whoever we might be, we are to be those who watch yourselves spiritually, to be alert, to be those who recognise the danger of drifting from that truth, slowly and perceptibly losing sight of the significance and importance of what Jesus has done and why that matters.

[15:00] And maybe with the passing of time, you think it becomes less significant. Well, it happened such a long time ago, how can it be just as relevant? And He warns against that. And we know that the Bible in many places warns us not to grow cold, not to lose our attachment to Jesus Christ, not to stop praying, not to move on to anything else, because He says that to live in the light of that truth enables us to know our reward in heaven. Now, the whole concept of reward is very difficult because we immediately associate reward with earning something that we deserve it. But really, biblically, I think the idea of reward in heaven means simply that as we stay close to Jesus, as we regard as important in our lives, what Jesus knows is important and what He values, what weight we put on following

Jesus and the truth of Jesus in our lives will be recognised to the degree we lived it in heaven. Christ values that as important and it will be reflected in how we spend eternity.

I don't know what that looks like, no idea whatsoever. But as we have depended on Jesus, Jesus recognises and sees that that has eternal value. There's weight living that. There's a weightiness about living close to Jesus Christ and keeping that truth in our hearts.

There's a weightiness that brings with it its own reward because there's value in remaining close to Christ. So there's this encouragement, this challenge to be vigilant or to watch yourselves. And also, the second challenge is not to run ahead. Everyone who goes ahead and doesn't abide, so you've got two things going on there. We're told not to run away and run ahead of that teaching and find something new or something flash or something more modern.

But we're told to remain. We're told to stay in that truth. We can't move out. There's lots of ways in which we're to move forward. We move forward in the truth of Jesus Christ.

[17:29] We're not to run ahead of it to maybe some sophisticated truth that leaves the gospel and the message of a crucified and risen Savior in the cupboard. We are to progress in our knowledge of that, but we're not to run ahead away from it. We're to remain in that truth.

And we will continue to encourage you to remain in that truth because we need to remain in that truth, all of us. We need to be founded in it because it's what gives us life and hope and security and fruitfulness and direction and blessing. So John then is totally uncompromising on this truth. And he calls those who move from that truth of the truth of the incarnation of Jesus and all that goes with that. He calls them in verse 7, he calls them deceivers who do not confess the coming of Jesus in the flesh. So there was this group in these early churches that moved away from the apostolic foundations of the truth and who maybe said things like, well, the body's evil and flesh is not good. There's no way God, the Son, would have come in the flesh. Maybe someone like God came and lived in Jesus for a while but then left him before he died. You don't need someone to die and across to forgive your sins because, well, the flesh is all going to be destroyed anyway. We need to look for some kind of spiritual enlightenment ourselves, get into a higher spiritual soul plane that we can find ourselves. And it doesn't matter too much how we live because, well, the body's just going to be destroyed. And we're not going to care too much for other people. We just need to find this

higher level of spiritual enlightenment through intellect and through knowledge and through insight. That is kind of the teaching that seemed to have become prevalent. Jesus didn't really, God didn't come in the flesh and we can really look after ourselves and save ourselves. And John is damning of these deceivers, he calls them, because they've moved away from God's own diagnosis. And we might not find exactly the same kind of heretical teaching in the church, but we do find similar kind of thinking among a lot of people today, isn't it? What is sin? You know, we're not really quite so bad. I'm sure we can earn God's favour, we can do our best and God will accept us. And I do, I'm as good as the next person. All these kind of things are all related to that. Now when that happens in the world, well, we can't expect anything else in many ways, can we? But when it happens in the church, we need to be super strong in arguing against that, especially if that becomes a message that is preached from churches that Jesus Christ didn't really need to come in the flesh. And he certainly didn't need to die in a cross. That is just cosmic child abuse. And we can move away from such old kind of thinking. And yet, it doesn't answer the primary questions of the reality of your hearts, the reality of sin, the reality of death, and a lack of assurance about being right with God and moving forward into eternity. If we don't need Jesus Christ, if we didn't need the cross, then let's just take the wine and the bread and just let's just eat, drink and be merry and enjoy it just as a slapstick meal together and not something sacramental and precious that reflects the person of Jesus Christ. So he calls them deceivers, but it's worse than that. He calls them anti-Christ. Such a one as a deceiver and the anti-Christ.

And it's strong, strong words. Because remember, this was the time before the New Testament canon had been complete. We've got great privilege and we've got great blessing from having a complete scripture, Old and New Testament, right to the end of Revelation. But this is before the end of the New Testament canon. And the apostolic message, the apostolic teaching and authority was fundamental to these new churches. And it was so significant that people held on to that teaching because it was what then became the inspiration for scripture, those who had been witnesses of Jesus and who had this message to declare and to preach.

But at this early stage in the church, lots of messengers came around with a different message. Now, in the New Testament church, when teachers came to a house church or a new church, they were to generally be invited into people's homes. They were to be given hospitality. They were to be listened to and their message was to be shared. But John Heavis saying, no, don't bring them into your home. Don't show them hospitality. Don't take them into your house. Don't receive their teaching. Don't even greet them because they are anti Christ. They are bringing a message that will destroy, it will not heal and will not bring life. These were wolves. They were in competition to the apostolic message. They were after power and control and they were engaging in spiritual abuse. Oh yeah, it's not a new concept, spiritual abuse and church leadership goes right back to the New Testament.

[23 : 47] And he says, don't welcome them nor their message. Don't give them that respect that they seek. And we have a duty in our lives and in our understanding of the truth, not to partner with those who preach a false message that moves away from the gospel of Jesus Christ and the incarnation of Jesus Christ as God the Son who died to atone for the sins of His people and who rose again to offer eternal life. It's why we can't partner with churches who would openly teach and preach a liberal theology that moves away from the traditional understanding of the apostolic fathers. And that has nothing to do with being separatist.

I hope we can still love and understand and communicate warmly with such people. But it is to do with our understanding of truth and its implications. And it's something that we need to recognize in our own individual lives. I think particularly when we have such access to online teaching, when maybe church isn't quite so significant to many people and worship and learning under the word, maybe becoming less significant because there's much better guys that preach online. But there's a danger of putting yourself under teaching that it moves away from the apostolic foundations and the confessional standards that we regard as so important and that are based on God's word.

So in conclusion, very briefly, John's strong words are a reminder to us of the foundation of the gospel. And just lastly, and I think this is very, very important because John sees it as, and it makes sense, doesn't it, that it's so important, that when we accept this fundamental foundational truth that is revealed in Scripture about Jesus Christ and about Him coming and about His substitutionary death on our behalf, it's the truth, it's the only truth that unlocks true love. It's the only truth that unlocks true love. Because what John is stating here as he's done, as we looked at last week when

he talked about the commandment we've been given from the beginning to love one another, and it's based on the truth that's been revealed, the message they've had from the beginning. It is that to genuinely love one another is, has a doctrinal basis. It is a basis in doctrinal truth. True doctrine is always a walk into shared divine love. That's a really important point to finish with. The truth that we believe, the truth that we confess, the truth that we hold to, never stays on the page. It never stays on the page of Scripture. And I think that comes across in John's closing words when he says, though I have much to write to you, I would much rather not use paper ink instead I hope to come to you, talk to you face to face. Because he realizes that doctrinal truth is primarily, it's primarily relational. It always has been. Jesus Christ is revealed as the word, but is the word incarnate to whom we relate and we have a relationship with through salvation.

Doctrine, if you have a doctrine or a belief that allows you to be divisive, proud, power-seeking, superior or judgmental, it's not true doctrine, whatever it is. Whatever it is, it's not true doctrine. You may assent and I may assent to the truth, but if it hasn't reached your heart, it's not truth at all. Loveless, can I say something strong? Loveless doctrine is hellish because even Satan believes in shudders, even the demons believe in shudder.

The written word can only ever go so far for us, even the Bible. We don't worship the Bible, it's bibliography. We need the Holy Spirit to take the truth and incarnate it into our lives, into our hearts so that we love other people the way Jesus Christ loves us. Doctrinal truth is always there to change our hearts towards God. It's never a bare instruction manual. The Bible's never that. If you think that's where the Bible is, you're way off beam because it's relational truth that brings us into knowledge of Jesus Christ. Truth is incarnational. It's the outworking of God's grace to us. John could see that. He could see. That's why he was so, he spoke in such damnable terms of those deceivers because they were divisive, they were separatist, they caused trouble in the church, they didn't love their brothers and sisters, they just, they just caused havoc. For us, truth is a face-to-face religion with the living God. And that's why we can talk about the pinnacle of our relationship being in heaven when Jesus will wipe away every tear from our eyes. That just speaks of a face-to-face relationship. We have honesty and openness and courage and concerns that we share and that we live as people, not only before Jesus but also before our brothers and sisters. That is what completes joy in our Christian lives.

[29 : 32] Mere intellectual understanding of doctrine will not make you joyful. It needs to soak into your heart and transform your and my lives. The gospel is a community of Christ and His people around the campfire of truth. And that's the fullest, safest, strongest, toughest and best place to live our life in Jesus Christ. And you are called to do that in St. Columbus and I am called to do that. And if you're visiting with us tonight, you're called to do that in whatever gospel community you're part of. And if you're with us tonight and you're not a Christian, you're called and then commanded to come and know this Christ, who alone is the truth revealed, who alone can deal with your death and your separation from God and who alone can give you eternal life. It's the greatest message of all that we'll celebrate very shortly. Let's pray.

Father God, help us to understand your truth, not as a flat doctrine, not as a way of separating us in intellectual pride from other people or from other religions, but as an understanding of the universe, an understanding of God and of our need and of His solution, which is all of grace and all of goodness and love. And I haven't explained as much of that as I should have. He just comes in great love to provide that way back. He says, I am the way, the truth in the life. May we celebrate that through the Lord's Supper. And it may be a meaningful sacrament to us as it reminds us of this truth, is the broken body, the shed blood of Jesus as the sacrament He gives us because it's so critical and central to our lives. So Lord, help us to enjoy that truth and know it and experience it in our lives more and more we pray. In Jesus' name, amen.