

## The Sinner's Advocate

1 John 2:1–2

March 19, 2017

Think about this logically. People stand in line in the hot sun in order to be strapped into a metal seat with someone else to slowly move toward a precipice, and then suddenly tip over the edge, falling at incredible speed, rising, dropping, twisting, and jerking from side to side until the final rush to the end. That's a roller coaster ride. It makes you wonder why we pay to lose our stomachs and kick in our adrenalin. But we do it, smiling all the way.

A roller coaster in a theme park is one thing. But a roller coaster spiritual life is quite another. Up and down, twisting and turning, falling and rising, anguishing and struggling seems to be the mainstay of many Christians. If it were only in the first days of faith in Christ then it would be somewhat understandable. Yet it seems that some who have known Christ for many years still regularly ride the roller coaster.

Then First John is the right book. It helps us learn how to move from the roller coaster drop and twist of doubts, fears, and spiritual anxiety to walk in steadiness with the Lord. That doesn't mean that seasoned believers never face dips or twists but it does mean that they've learned more about themselves and far more on how to depend upon Christ day-by-day so that they develop consistent walks with Christ.

How do we walk in fellowship with the Lord? That's John's theme in these opening verses. He proclaimed Jesus as the Life so that through union with Him, believers might join in fellowship with one another and with our Triune God. This fellowship is with the God that John calls "Light." Fellowship with Him means walking in the Light. But that's just where we may struggle. How do we keep walking in the Light? *We have an Advocate with the Father so that we might walk in the Light and in fellowship with our God.* What's so critical about having an Advocate? Let's consider that question with five questions regarding our text.

### 1. Why do we need an Advocate?

There's not the least hint of scolding in John's teaching. He addresses his audience as "**My little children,**" a term of affection and an indication of the way that the old apostle felt about this church at Ephesus. As a fatherly figure in the faith, he sets before them truths necessary to walk with God.

In the previous passage (1:5–10), John assures Christians that the blood of Jesus goes on cleansing us from all sin, and that the Father is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins when we confess them. But some could misconstrue what he meant. In all likelihood, the opponents that John hints at throughout the letter had the idea that sin was no big deal. With that kind of atmosphere, hearing of this teaching on confession of sin might lead some to think that evidently, sin was no big deal since God forgives it so readily.

But that's not the case. "**My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.**" Rather than sin at will and just offer a little confession, then go about your merry way, John stops us in our tracks. Since "God is Light" we are to learn to live in view of Him as Light, with no darkness in Him at all. All pure and holy and righteous, God doesn't tolerate sin. It runs totally contrary to His nature and ways. He hates sin. His wrath, "a burning zeal for the right coupled with a perfect hatred for everything that is

evil,” is bent against sin [Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 209]. So John reminds us that he writes so that we might recognize sin’s danger and darkness, that we might see every act of sin—however small in our eyes—as treason against God, defiance against His holiness, an act of rebellion, and the object of His wrath.

The problem is that we’re so familiar with our sin and the sin of those around us that we often *don’t even notice sin*. We have a natural bent toward sin. We find ourselves comfortable with it. But Light exposes the darkness. When we’re united to Christ through faith, the Light of His Life discomferts us regarding sin. We’re troubled about its presence in our lives. We’re bothered about habits of sin. We often try to excuse our sins in order to deflect this guilt and concern over it. We hear the common refrain, ‘Well, no one is perfect,’ as though that is license to excuse whatever sins we might be covering up at the moment. Yet we know that sin is there and must be addressed.

So John’s words are startling: **“I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.”** There’s an intensity and purpose in walking with Christ—to not sin. Jesus saved us to deliver us from sin’s guilt and power, and ultimately, from its presence. The scrutiny that applies to Christians regarding sin is found in the Sermon on the Mount. Instead of just the bare law, ‘You shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery,’ Jesus intensifies it so that the *thought* and *motives* of the heart are sinful acts that we’re to resist and fight.

Yet in reality, we do sin. There’s no sinless perfection until we stand perfect before the Lord seeing Him as He is in all of His glory. Meanwhile the struggle with sin continues. Therefore John writes, **“And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father.”** God doesn’t overlook sin. He addresses it by sending the Advocate so that there is forgiveness with Him. Leon Morris explained the wonder of forgiveness, “We can think of forgiveness as something real only when we hold that sin has betrayed us into a situation where we deserve to have God inflict upon us the most serious consequences” [213]. In that setting, the Advocate stands on our behalf.

## 2. What is an Advocate?

We’re accustomed to advocates in legal settings. Someone in violation of a law or in trouble over an action needs an advocate that will stand to plead his case. In such settings, an attorney is normally that advocate. That’s helpful but it doesn’t fully explain what John means, **“And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”** John is the only NT writer that uses this term, four times in his Gospel (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7) and once in our text (1 John 2:1). We’re familiar with the translation in John’s Gospel of the Holy Spirit as “the Comforter” (KJV) or “the Counselor” (HCSB) or “the Helper” (NASB, ESV). The NIV translates the Greek term (*parakletos*) as “the Advocate,” just as we have here. It means, “One called alongside to help,” or “one who comes to the aid of another.” Or more fully, “one who appears on another’s behalf, mediator, intercessor, helper” [BDAG, 766]. This divine *Paraclete* is our “advocate, our representative in the trial, our intercessor, comforter,” as Adolph Deissman notes [*Light from the Ancient East*, 336]. John says this of the Holy Spirit in his Gospel and of Jesus in this letter. It heightens Paul’s statement, “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom 8:31)

When Onesimus fled to Rome from his master Philemon, he found his way to Paul who became his father in the faith. As the slave sought to return to his master, Paul

became a *paraclete* or advocate for him. He stood between Philemon and Onesimus, offering himself and his resources to right the wrongs and cover the debts.

Our Advocate before the Father is not a dispassionate voice hired to get us out of a jam regarding our sin. He is a Friend and Brother standing **“with the Father”** on our behalf, *assuring* us that He has come alongside to help us in our weakness, to plead His bloody death on our behalf, and to affirm with the Father our union with Him. It’s not that the Father is reluctant to forgive and receive us. He sent His Son to the cross *for us*. But the Son’s presence before the Father is the guarantee that God forgives and restores.

### 3. Who is our Advocate?

Not just any *advocate* will do. If it were the need for an advocate to vouch for us on a car or home loan, or to put in a good word for us about a job, or to recommend that we receive an honor at school, there might be many that would advocate for us in that regard. I’ve completed dozens of recommendations for people in our church applying to college or for a job. In that sense, I’ve been an advocate, a friend called alongside to help in that particular need.

But we’ve sinned against God, who is Light, who created the world, who judges its inhabitants, and who will by no means clear the guilty (Exod 34:7). I can’t advocate for anyone, even myself, in that regard, since I’m guilty of sin and in need of an advocate. No church leader or father in the faith or spiritual giant can advocate for any of us. Only One can do so.

“The Advocate has been appointed by the judge,” as Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it [*Studies in 1 John: Walking with God*, 40]. **“And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father.”** That prepositional phrase, **“with the Father,”** mirrors John 1:1, “And the Word was with God.” That points to the divine co-equality of our Advocate, who has the right to be with the Father and who, Himself, has no need for an advocate by reason of His sinlessness. As God, He is Light, so utterly holy and pure, with no darkness at all. Think of how John opened this letter, calling Him, “the Word of Life and the life . . . the eternal life, which was *with the Father* and was manifested to us.”

Yet our Advocate who stands with the Father on our behalf is the same one, who at the cross, cried, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Psa 22:1; Matt 27:46) He was forsaken when He became sin for us so that we might never be forsaken before the Father despite our weaknesses and sins.

John confirms that this Advocate with the Father is **“Jesus Christ the righteous.”** *Jesus*, the name given at His birth, points to His humanity: He is one of us in humanity. *Christ*, the Greek term for Messiah—is the One promised by God from Genesis 3:15 onward; He is the One that David called Lord ten centuries before the Incarnation (Psa 110:1): He is deity, so in that regard, not like us. And further unlike us, He is **“the righteous.”** We need to view that loaded description from both His deity and humanity.

As God, Jesus is *righteous*. John has just explained that “He is faithful and righteous” when it comes to forgiving us (1:9). Peter called Jesus “the just [the righteous] [who died for] the unjust [unrighteous], so that He might bring us to God” (1 Pet 3:18). Jesus as righteous implies that He is *just* in all that He thinks and does (1 John 2:19; 3:7). There is no sin in Him (1 John 3:5); He does not act contrary to His righteous nature.

And He is *righteous as a Man*, as well. Never did Jesus sin or act contrary to the Law. He was made like us in all things “so that He might become a merciful and faithful high

priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17). He was tempted in all things like us, yet never sinned (Heb 4:15). Having fulfilled the Law, He is the end of the Law for righteousness to all who believe (Rom 10:4). The article before the term, “**the righteous,**” emphasizes the unique qualification that Jesus had to go to the cross for us. Without being “**the righteous,**” His act of substitution in laying down His life as a satisfaction to God would have been meaningless. Our Advocate is both God and Man, and all together righteous in His deity and humanity. This is the One *with the Father*, called alongside to help us in our need.

#### 4. What qualifies His advocacy?

Let’s not lose sight of why we need an Advocate: “**And if anyone sins.**” Sin looms before us. Guilt clobbers our thoughts, making our prayers seem meaningless. It robs us of quiet meditation upon the Word, instead condemning us for our failures before God. It starts shouting in our minds when we want to do acts of service or participate in worship. And worst yet, sin is the reminder of broken fellowship with God. The wall seems so high and impenetrable. Yet *if anyone sins*—and that includes each of us—“**we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.**” So take heart! Do not fear! The Judge who eyes your sins sent His Son as your Advocate. His throne room is not one of animosity, anger, and rejection but one of mercy and love (Heb 4:16). You can be assured that God welcomes you into fellowship with Him because “He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). He made Himself accessible through the cross-work of His Son.

What qualified Jesus to advocate for us? “**And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins.**” The language is emphatic: it is Jesus and Jesus only that is the propitiation for our sins. He is not one among many who propitiates but rather, “**the propitiation**” [Morris, 187]. But what does *propitiation* mean?

That term was used quite often in the Greek and Roman world. It describes some act that devotees might do to assuage or turn away the anger of the capricious gods they worshiped. Yet in that setting there was often trickery, deceit, and manipulation to deflect the gods’ angry tantrums against them.

Our God is unlike that. His anger is righteous, never capricious, never a ranting tantrum, and never spiteful. How can that be? As we saw in our recent Wednesday study of David Powlison’s book, *Good & Angry*, “. . . anger done right is a great good. . . . Jesus gets good and angry—in the service of mercy and peace” [1]. He is righteous, or as it can be translated, *just*. Justice (that includes wrath in an act of judgment against the sinner) is bound up in righteousness as the proper response to any breach of righteousness. Sinners are lawbreakers. “There is none righteous, not even one” (Rom 3:10). God’s just wrath against sin must be satisfied or else God will not be righteous by letting sin slide.

“**And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins.**” He is the *satisfaction with reference to our sins* before the judgment of God. In this sense, as the entire book of Hebrews gives vivid commentary, Jesus is both the High Priest who offers the propitiatory sacrifice (atoning sacrifice) and the propitiation Himself. The propitiation turns away the wrath of God by satisfying that wrath in an act of substitutionary sacrifice.

The high priest entered the holy of holies once a year with the blood of a young goat that represented the people, and through death, the atonement for their sins. He sprinkled

the blood on a golden slab above the Ark of the Covenant known as *the mercy seat*. That was the *place of propitiation*—the very spot where God's wrath was satisfied on behalf of the people through the act of that bloody sacrifice.

The Greek word that the Septuagint translators used for the Hebrew term “mercy seat” was *hilasmos*, which is the same word that John uses to describe Jesus as “**the propitiation**.” But this time it was not the blood of a goat or an offering on a golden slab or an annual act but the blood of the Righteous One offered at the cross once for all time (Heb 10:11–14). At the cross Jesus turned away the wrath of God *and* dealt with our sin to remove the guilt and take away its power so that we might belong to God, and live faithfully as His holy people.

So our Advocate does more than talk. His advocacy has no cause to resort to exaggerating about how good we are or what wonderful children to God we would be. He knows better than that. He knows that we're sinners, rebels, and antagonistic toward God. Yet the Judge, out of His great love and mercy, sent the Advocate to justly turn away His wrath and to satisfy eternal justice with reference to our sins. *Now* He comes alongside to help us when we sin, assuring us that what He did on that cross continues to satisfy God and remove the guilt and cleanse us from unrighteousness.

No more do we need to try to persuade God of our righteousness—our Advocate pleads His own for us.

No more do we need to labor at the law's demands for righteousness—Jesus has fulfilled the Law for us through His obedience.

No more do we need to think that we can add something more to turn God's anger away from us or to assuage His wrath by lingering in guilt and doing acts of penance—Jesus has turned away God's wrath, having satisfied His demands with regard to our sins.

## 5. Whose Advocate is He?

Some think that Jesus *only propitiated for others*, not for them. But John says emphatically, “No!” “**And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.**” Jesus is not a tribal deity helping out a few devoted followers. He's the Savior of the world. He's the hope for sinners among every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Rev 5:9). And that includes you who hear the good news and with weakness, turn to Him and believe. Get off the roller coaster. You can have fellowship with God because Jesus is the propitiation for our sins.