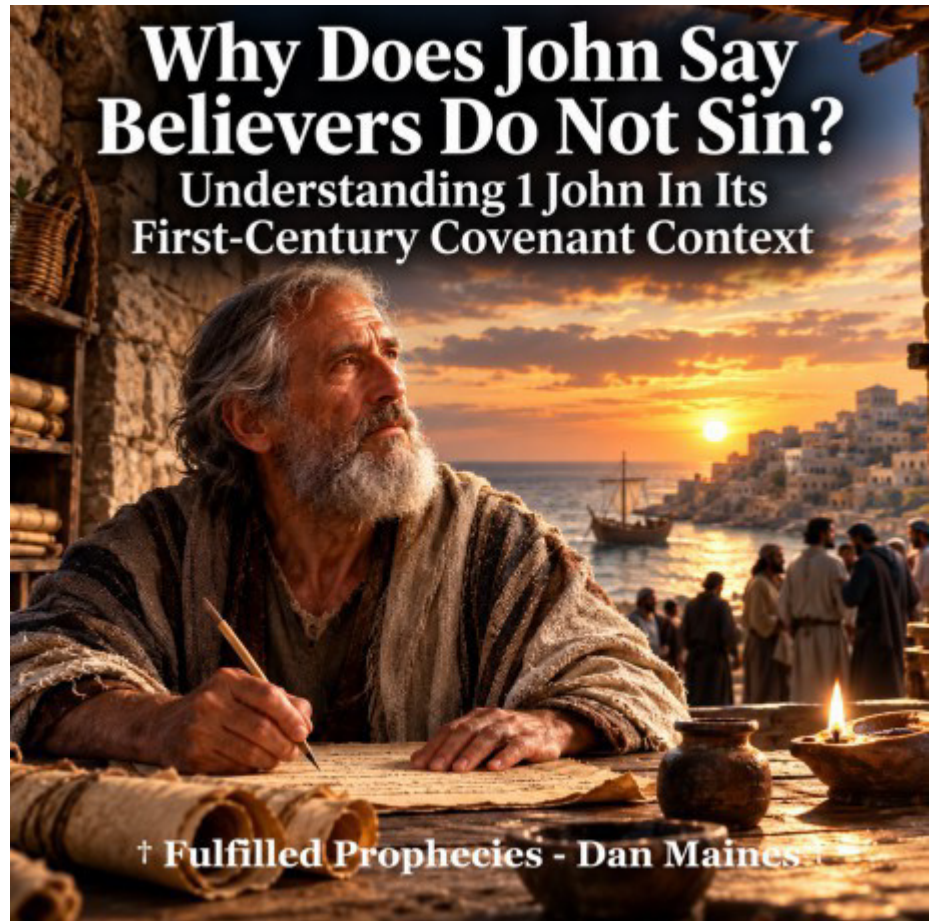


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**Why Does John Say Believers Do Not Sin?
Understanding 1 John In Its First-Century Covenant Context**



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† At first glance, John appears to contradict himself. In **1 John 1:10** he says, "If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar," yet later he says, "Everyone who remains in Him does not sin. " and "he cannot sin." Some modern translations render these as "keeps on sinning" or "continues to sin." While the Greek present tense often carries the idea of ongoing action,

the answer isn't found in grammar alone. The answer is found in the historical setting of John's letter. John was writing during the "last hour" of the Old Covenant, contrasting those who remained in unbelief with those who had come into Christ. Once we keep that covenant context in view, the supposed contradiction disappears.

1 John 2:18

Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour.

† John clearly identifies the time in which he was writing. It was not thousands of years in the future, but the last hour of the Old Covenant age. (Matthew 24:34; Hebrews 8:13)

† The presence of many antichrists proved that the covenant age was coming to its appointed end just as Jesus had foretold. (Matthew 24:5, 24; 2 Peter 3:3-4)

† Every statement in this letter must first be understood within that first-century setting before applying its principles today. (Revelation 1:1-3)

1 John 2:22-23

Who is the liar except the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.

† John defines antichrist himself. It is those denying that Jesus is the Christ, not a future world ruler. (2 John 7)

† This explains why unbelief is central throughout the letter. John continually contrasts those who confess Christ with those

who reject Him. (John 3:18; John 20:31)

† This covenant contrast prepares the reader for John's later statements about those who abide in Christ versus those who remain outside of Him. (1 John 3:8-10)

1 John 1:8-10

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous, so that He will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

† John begins by exposing those who denied their guilt before God. Anyone claiming to have no need of forgiveness was rejecting God's testimony concerning man's condition. (Romans 3:23; John 3:18)

† The issue is not whether believers had ever committed sin, but whether they acknowledged their need for Christ's cleansing. (Romans 5:8-9; Titus 3:5)

† Denying sin was evidence that God's word was not dwelling in them because they rejected the One who came to take away sin. (John 1:29; John 8:24)

1 John 3:5-6

You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. No one who remains in Him sins continually; no one who sins continually has seen Him or knows Him.

† John now contrasts two covenant identities. Those abiding in Christ are no longer identified by the realm of sin but by the life

found in Him. (Romans 6:6-11; Colossians 3:3)

† Christ came to remove the dominion and power of sin. Those remaining outside of Him demonstrated that they had not truly known Him. (John 8:34-36; Romans 6:14)

† John is not teaching absolute human perfection. He is describing the distinguishing character of those who belong to Christ versus those remaining in unbelief during the closing days of the Old Covenant. (1 John 2:3-6; John 15:4-5)

1 John 3:9

No one who has been born of God practices sin, because His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin continually, because he has been born of God.

† John repeats the same principle, showing he is emphasizing covenant identity, not contradicting what he wrote in chapter one. (Romans 6:11-14; Colossians 3:1-4)

† God's seed remains in those who belong to Christ. Their lives are now defined by the new birth rather than the old covenant life dominated by sin. (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:1-6)

† Read together with the surrounding context, John is contrasting the children of God with the children of the devil, not teaching that believers never commit an individual act of sin. (1 John 3:8-10)

1 John 5:18

We know that no one who has been born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.

† The one born of God belongs to a new covenant relationship where Christ Himself guards His people. (John 10:27-29; Colossians 1:13)

† John again emphasizes covenant identity rather than claiming believers never commit an act of sin. His focus is on those who belong to Christ versus those who belong to the evil one. (1 John 3:8-10)

† Throughout this letter, John continually contrasts light and darkness, truth and error, Christ and antichrist, children of God and children of the devil. These are covenant distinctions defining where a person stands before God. (1 John 2:9-11; 1 John 4:1-6)

1 John 5:13

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

† John tells us exactly why he wrote this letter. His purpose was to assure believers of the life they already possessed in Christ. (John 5:24)

† This confirms that the letter is about confidence in Christ and distinguishing true believers from false teachers during the last hour. (1 John 2:18-19)

† Eternal life was already a present possession for those abiding in Christ, not merely a future hope. (John 17:3)

Understanding The Greek Present Tense

† Some modern translations read "keeps on sinning" or "continues to sin" in 1 John 3:6 and 5:18. Those words are not separate words in the Greek text. They are an interpretive

translation of the Greek present tense, which can describe an ongoing or characteristic action depending on the context.

† The Greek text of 1 John 3:6 reads:
pas ho en auto menon ouch hamartanei

A literal rendering is:
Everyone remaining in Him does not sin.

† The Greek text of 1 John 5:18 reads:
pas ho gegennemenos ek tou theou ouch hamartanei

A literal rendering is:
Everyone who has been born of God does not sin.

† John's meaning is determined by the context of the entire letter, not by one Greek tense alone. Throughout 1 John he contrasts those who remain in Christ with those who reject Him. His emphasis is covenant identity and the life found in Christ, not teaching that believers never commit an individual act of sin. (1 John 1:8-10; 1 John 2:18-23; 1 John 3:8-10)

Historical References

† Early church writers consistently understood 1 John as addressing first-century churches facing false teachers who denied Christ and sought to deceive believers during the closing years before Jerusalem's destruction.

† Eusebius records that John's ministry centered on protecting the churches of Asia from false teachers and preserving apostolic doctrine during this transitional period.

† The historical setting fits John's repeated emphasis that it was already "the last hour," confirming the imminent end of the Old Covenant age rather than events thousands of years later.

How It Applies To Us Today

† We can have confidence in our salvation because our standing before God is based on Christ's finished work, not on our ability to achieve sinless perfection. (Romans 8:1; Hebrews 10:14)

† John reminds us that genuine faith produces a transformed life. Those who remain in Christ are no longer defined by the old life of sin but by the new life He has given them. (2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 6:11-14)

† We should always interpret Scripture within its historical and covenant context. Ignoring John's first-century audience leads to confusion and apparent contradictions that disappear when the context is respected. (1 John 2:18; Hebrews 8:13)

† False teaching still exists today. While the specific first-century antichrists are gone, we must continue to reject every teaching that denies who Jesus is or undermines His completed work. (1 John 2:22-23; Colossians 2:13-15)

† Because Christ has fulfilled the Old Covenant, we are free to live in the reality of the New Covenant, walking in His light with confidence, gratitude, and assurance rather than fear and uncertainty. (Hebrews 12:22-24; Ephesians 2:13-22)

Q & A Appendix

Q: Does 1 John teach that Christians never commit a sin?

A: No. John is contrasting those who abide in Christ with those who remain in unbelief. His emphasis is covenant identity and the transformed life found in Christ, not sinless perfection. (1 John 1:8-10; 1 John 3:5-10; Romans 6:1-14)

Q: Why does John say it was "the last hour"?

A: Because he was writing during the final days of the Old Covenant before its judgment and passing away in AD 70. (1 John 2:18; Hebrews 8:13; Matthew 24:34)

Q: Why do some modern translations say "keep on sinning" or "continue sinning" in 1 John 3:6 and 5:18?

A: The Greek text does not contain separate words meaning "keep on" or "continue." Translators supplied those words because they understood the Greek present tense to describe ongoing or characteristic action. Whether or not that is the best way to express John's meaning, his context provides the answer. Throughout the letter John contrasts those who remain in Christ with those who reject Him. His emphasis is on covenant identity and the life found in Christ, not on sinless perfection. (1 John 1:8-10; 1 John 2:18-23; 1 John 3:5-10; 1 John 5:13)

Q: Who are the antichrists John was talking about?

A: John defines them himself. They were those who denied that Jesus is the Christ and rejected both the Father and the Son. John was not describing a future world ruler but false teachers who were already active in his own day. (1 John 2:22-23; 2 John 7)

Q: If believers still struggle with sin, how can John say they "do not sin"?

A: John is describing the believer's identity and relationship with Christ. Those who remain in Christ are no longer defined by sin because Christ has broken its dominion over them. His focus is on who believers are in Christ, not on claiming they never commit an individual act of sin. (Romans 6:6-14; Colossians

3:1-4; 1 John 3:5-10)

Q: How do we know John was writing primarily to a first-century audience?

A: John repeatedly said it was the "last hour" and identified antichrists who were already present. His audience was living during the closing days of the Old Covenant, just before its promised end. (1 John 2:18; Hebrews 8:13; Matthew 24:34)

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †

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Source Index

† 1 John 1:8-10; 1 John 2:18; 1 John 2:22-23; 1 John 3:5-6; 1 John 3:9; 1 John 5:13; 1 John 5:18

† Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History

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