

## “He Is the True God and Eternal Life”

### The Eleventh in a Series of Sermons on John’s Epistles

*Texts: 1 John 5:13-21; Isaiah 44:6-20*

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John has written a rather impassioned defense of our Lord’s incarnation—Jesus is eternal God manifest in human flesh. Throughout his first epistle, the Apostle has reminded us that the reason why Jesus came to earth was to save us from our sins. Our Lord’s incarnation is no mere curiosity. Our salvation depends upon it. But the sad fact is that through the efforts of false teachers, a number of people in and around Ephesus (where John was living as the last apostle) had become convinced that while Jesus was truly God, he only took the form of a man. John calls this destructive false teaching the spirit of antichrist. This is known as the docetic heresy and it completely undermines the Apostles’ testimony about Jesus. This heresy also completely undermines John’s gospel. If Jesus is not truly human, as well as fully God, then we are still in our sins. For John’s reader, the truth of Christianity stands or falls based upon the truthfulness of John’s testimony about Jesus, whom John claims to have seen, heard, and touched.

As we wrap our study of 1 John, we will make our way through the closing verses of chapter 5 (vv. 13-21). While John brings this letter to a close, he continues to emphasize the same theme which dominates this epistle’s final chapter—a believer’s assurance of God’s favor toward them in Christ. In order to assure Christians of God’s favor toward them, John continues to flesh out his basic point about knowing—“how do we know that we know?” This is an especially important question in light of the fact that the false teachers plaguing the churches to which John was writing, were claiming to “know” certain things about Jesus which previously were hidden or secret. The false teachers were claiming (in light of this secret knowledge) that Jesus was not truly human. This meant John’s readers faced a choice. Do they believe the testimony of John? Or do they accept this secret teaching which contends that since matter was intrinsically inferior to pure spirit, God could not take to himself a true human nature (a material body), and that Jesus, who was truly God, only appeared in the form of a man, much like someone puts on a costume. This, supposedly, accounts for Jesus’ physical appearances in the gospels.

This conflict explains why John opens this epistle with a truth claim grounded in his own experience and his testimony about Jesus. Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. John testifies to the truth because he saw Jesus, heard Jesus, and touched Jesus. Indeed, this is what all the apostles taught (i.e., why we call it the “catholic” or universal faith), and this is that truth to which the Holy Spirit will bear witness just as Jesus had promised before he ascended into heaven. Therefore, the question of how a Christian “knows that they know,” along with the assurance they have of God’s favor toward them in Christ, becomes a very important matter—especially in the presence of those who claim to have “knowledge” which contradicts the testimony of John. How do we know the basic Christian claim that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh to be true? And can we be assured of God’s favor toward us, without committing the sin of presumption?

Not only does John deal with these issues in the final chapter, John has several other quick points to make as he wraps up. In verse 13 we find a summary statement about why John composed this epistle, while in verses 14-17 John speaks of prayer, especially of the importance of praying for those who have fallen into serious sin. In verses 18-20, John reminds us of God’s gracious protection of those whom he has brought from death to life. The apostle also reminds us of the fact that we can indeed truly know we are Christ’s, and that through Christ we have fellowship with the Father. And then in verse 21, John closes with a brief reminder about the dangers of idolatry—something especially important to Christians

living in and around Ephesus, a city dominated by the Temple of Diana.

All of these points reflect John's previous and repeated discussion about how it is that Christians are to differentiate themselves from those who have been taken in by the false teachers.<sup>1</sup> For John this is no intermural debate. Jesus has come as God manifest in the flesh. To deny this is to deny Christianity. And if God has brought us from death to life through the preaching of the gospel, and if Christ has died for us as a propitiation for our sins, and if Jesus is presently interceding for us in heaven, and because Jesus has given us his Holy Spirit, then this will be evident in our lives. Our faith in Christ (which God himself has created within us through the preaching of the gospel) will transform our behavior. If we are Christ's, then we will strive to obey his commandments, love our Christian brothers and sisters, avoid thinking and behaving as non-Christians (worldliness), and we will be willing to engage those who claim to be Christians, but deny essential Christian doctrine (those whom John has identified as antichrists).

And so with this in mind, we take up John's conclusion to his first epistle, verses 13-21. **A**While most English Bible translations have a new paragraph beginning in verse 13, verse 13 does not introduce what follows in verses 14-21, but rather it is a summary statement regarding everything that John has stated up to this point.<sup>2</sup> *"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life."* Before we unpack the details of this summary statement, it may be useful to recall that John gives us a similar statement near the end of his gospel (John 20:30-31). *"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."* Make no mistake about it, John composes his gospel to convince all those who read it that Jesus is the Christ. The difference is that here in 1 John, John writes with the goal of giving those who already believe in Jesus the assurance that they presently possess eternal life (i.e., that "they can know that they know are in Christ").

It is important to point out that many churches (certainly the Roman Catholic church) consider the very idea of the assurance of one's salvation to be a sin—the so-called sin of presumption. You may be in a state of grace now, but how do you know that you will not commit a mortal sin at some point in the future, and thereby be severed from Christ? It is also argued that if we tell people that they can presently have the assurance of their salvation, the knowledge of this will make them careless and indifferent about living the Christian life. Why should we persevere in godly living, if we know now that we have eternal life? What is the point, it is argued, of doing good works if there is no reward at the end?

But John does the very thing critics of the doctrine of assurance don't want done—he assures his reader of God's favor. *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.* While it may be said John's Gospel was written to convince unbelievers of the truth of the gospel, this first epistle was written for the express purpose of giving Christians assurance so that they might know that they presently possess eternal life. Again the verbs here are important—they are in the present tense. Believers may know (here and now) that they have (here and now) eternal life.

This assurance stems from what God has already done for us in the person of Jesus, who is God manifest

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<sup>1</sup> Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 294.

<sup>2</sup> Stott, Epistles of John, 186-187; Smalley, 1, 2, 3 John, 289.

in the flesh. It is not found within, but objectively (outside of us) in the person of Jesus (God in human flesh) and in his work on our behalf (his suffering upon the cross). These are the indicatives, we keep talking about. Two times John has reminded us that Jesus has died as a propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:2; 4:10). A propitiation is a sacrifice which turns aside God's wrath. John has told us that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin, and that God is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins whenever we confess them. John has also told us that God is love, and because God has made us alive in Christ, we will demonstrate love for all those whom God has made alive and for whom Christ has died. The very presence of such love in our midst is one important sign by which we may know that we are Christ's.

Based on these comments, it very much seems to me that John isn't at all worried about any negative effects of believers having assurance of their salvation. In fact, it is the assurance of our salvation (an indicative) which serves as the basis for all of those commands John has given us to obey God's commandments and to love our neighbor. For John the indicatives (which he has labored to set forth) precede the imperatives (through which Christians demonstrate that they are not like those taken in by the false teachers, and who remain indifferent to the ethical teaching of the New Testament).

The application for us today is clear. Is fear the best motivation for godly living? Is Rome right—that it is the sin of presumption to claim to know that because we are presently in a state of grace we will be saved eternally? Is Wesley right when he claims that the proper motivation for the Christian life is fear of punishment and hope of reward? In light of these approaches to the Christian life, there are two key issues raised by John which we need to consider, before taking up a practical matter which applies directly to the reader of this epistle who doesn't live in Ephesus near the end of the first century.

The first thing to consider is to understand why the Apostle goes to such great lengths to assure us of God's favor. He does this so that we will see the false teaching of the proto-Gnostic heretics for what it truly is—an effort to deceive us, and draw us away from Christ. Someone who does not have the assurance of their salvation (who “does not know that they know”) is a much easier target for “secret knowledge” and the docetic heresy than someone who has a good grasp of the basics of the faith and who believes John's testimony about Jesus. Someone who believes John is telling the truth about Jesus is not going to believe one of these enlightened teachers when they come claiming to have knowledge of secret insights into the ministry of Jesus, which the Apostle, supposedly, has left out.

The second thing we need to consider is that John has made his case that proper doctrine is the only basis for Christian living. We must understand how the indicative and imperative (law and gospel) are related. Rome and Wesley both speak of the Christian life in similar terms—“live as the apostle commands, and only then, may you come (perhaps) to know the blessings of such godly living.” Rome argues that it takes a supernatural revelation of God to have this kind of assurance. Wesley, on the other hand, says that John is exhorting Christians to strive for perfection—i.e., in their ability to love others, and that some Christians actually achieve this. But John comes at this matter of assurance in an entirely different way.

Confidence of God's favor toward us (which is a personal assurance that Christ died for your sins) is the basis for all of the commands to obey God's law and love our neighbor. John has told us that love casts out fear. And so whenever we consider God's love for us in Christ (and we look to Jesus' suffering and dying on the cross, for us, and in our place), John says that gives us confidence for the day of judgment. If Christ has already been punished for our sins, why fear judgment? The reality is that a person who lives in fear of God's judgment and in self-condemnation and failure, is not much able to love, obey, and to have any confidence in God's mercy. But a person who looks to the cross, and who sees a gracious God whose anger toward their sins has been turned away, is much better able to strive to obey God's

commandments, love their neighbor, resist the pull toward worldliness, and oppose the antichrist. Those who believe the gospel are delivered from selfish fears and are set free to obey.

As for us those of us who don't live in Ephesus in the first century and who face different circumstances than John and his original audience, we cannot put into words how great is that blessing which God grants to us in the knowledge that our sins have been forgiven. That is why it is not my job to be a life coach, a motivator, a fix-it guy, or any other such thing. My job is to declare to you what John has said to all of us—*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.*” It was John Calvin, who said that the minister's role is to be a minister of assurance. Those words “Go in peace! The Lord is with you.” are not to be taken lightly. God not only assures us of his favor in the gospel, as well as bearing witness to the truth of that gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit, these words from John actually empower us to do what God commands of us—to obey God's law, love our brothers and sisters, and to live lives of gratitude before God.

Fear of punishment and the hope of reward is utterly self-centered and cannot set us free to obey. Fear enslaves us. And given Rome's worry about people having assurance of salvation, it is not an accident that there are so many jokes about Roman Catholic guilt. This explains why the practice of auricular confession to a priest is such a necessity in Roman piety. The priest will be all too happy to give you something to do—“say x number of ‘hail Marys’” and so on, to keep you busy so you don't worry about your lack of assurance. But the Apostle John offers us the assurance of God's favor in Christ, because he knows that will stir us to love and obey.

Furthermore, John doesn't stop with the fact that we can “know” God's assurance of our salvation, in verses 14-15, he speaks of the confidence we have in prayer. “*And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.*” Since Jesus has died for us, as well as presently intercedes for us, John says we can approach God in prayer in confidence. Because of the present work of Jesus—in terms of his intercession for us before the Father—we know that whatever we ask of God (if our petition is in accord with his will) he hears us and grants our request.

In this, we have the prayer which Jesus himself taught us to pray (the Lord's Prayer), as an example to us of proper prayer. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus instructs us to pray that God's will be done on earth as it already is in heaven. This fits with what John says here—“if we ask anything according with God's will.” These words remind us that proper prayer is never to be understood as our pleading with God to get him to change his mind about our particular circumstances. Rather, when we pray according to God's will, we are, in effect, asking God to change our minds about what he has already decreed to come to pass. That said, however, it may appear to us that God does indeed change things after we pray. But it is we who have changed, as God simply brings to pass what he has decreed all along. It is also true that God uses our prayers as a means to accomplish his purposes, which is why we pray in confidence.

At this point we need to comment on the error of those who see prayer as some sort of a whiney petition in which we plead with God to give us what we want. God will not grant us our sinful requests—for our own good. Think, for a moment, of what your life would be like if God granted your self-centered, sinful prayer requests. This is not an act of confident faith, but a sinful whim. We must also point out the despicable nature of the Word-Faith heresy and the doctrine of positive confession. Sorry, but we don't call things into being through our prayers. It is not biblical to attempt to bind God to give us what we confess with our mouths, if we say it the right way with enough faith. Aside from the fact that this is not prayer at all—it is a sinful tantrum—positive confession has much more in common with paganism and so-

called “white magic” than it does with Christianity.

Furthermore, John’s comments should remind us that prayer is a great privilege which springs out of our confidence in God’s love toward us in Christ. A person who “knows that they know,” is far less likely to pray the kind of *quid pro quo* prayers (bargaining with God) of those who live in fear—“do this for me just one time, and I’ll live for you from now on.” Since prayer is a privilege secured for us by the blood of Jesus, and since prayer grounded in our Lord’s present intercession for us before the Father, then we can be confident that God hears us (for the sake of Christ) and that he answers us according to his will. God knows our needs long before we do. He is far more ready to help and come to our aid than we are even apt to ask him for help.

In verse 16, John now takes up a difficult subject—a sin that leads to death. He writes, “*If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.*” Confidence in God’s love for us should make us cognizant of God’s work in the life of others. It is our duty to pray for our brothers and sisters who fall into sin—presumably some sort of serious sin, the knowledge of which motivates God’s people to pray for the person so that they will repent of their sin and be fully restored (i.e., God will give them life). The language indicates that God hears this prayer and answers it—in accordance with the *proviso* set out previously, if this is in accord with the will of God. In Reformed churches such a prayer is the so-called second step of church discipline. This follows silent censure (barring from the Lord’s Supper) and the person’s name is not mentioned at this point. But if the person persists in their sin, and if the classis concurs with the efforts of the congregation to pray for such a person and seek their repentance, only then is the person named and the offence specified when the church prays for them. And only if the person still refuses to repent, can they be excommunicated.

John makes a distinction here between sin which leads to death and sin which doesn’t. But John doesn’t define this sin and commentators have long been divided about John’s meaning.<sup>3</sup> Some take this to refer to a specific sin, like those mentioned in the Mosaic law as a capital offence (to be punished by death). Some of the church fathers interpreted this to mean that there were sins of ignorance, and sins stemming from a wanton rebellion against God—the latter lead to death. This eventually led to Rome’s distinction between venial sin, and the so-called seven deadly “mortal sins.” This cannot be correct given the arbitrary nature of this distinction. And it certainly doesn’t fit the context.

Another group of commentators take John to be referring to the sin of apostasy. If true, John would be referring to a situation similar to that described in Hebrews 6:4-6. “*For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.*” While the author of Hebrews is referring to someone who goes back to Judaism and works-righteousness *after* professing faith in Christ, John would be saying that those who embrace the docetic Jesus of the antichrist, commit a sin which severs them from Christ. While this interpretation fits the context, it would pit John against himself. A Christian cannot commit such a sin—“*No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God*” (1 John 3:9). If John is referring to a professing Christian only (and not a true believer), who eventually reveals their unbelief by imbibing of the spirit of

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<sup>3</sup> See the helpful discussion in; Stott, The Epistles of John, 190-193.

antichrist and then committing apostasy, this interpretation would have great weight.<sup>4</sup>

A third option is that John is referring to blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—a sin which had been committed by the Pharisees as recounted in Mark 3:28-30. “*Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin—for they were saying, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’*” While that certainly seems to fit the context, the fact of the matter is the circumstances are completely different. The Pharisees had just witnessed Jesus heal and perform exorcisms, and then attributed God’s power to the work of Satan. While John may very well be referring to this sin, if he is, he’s extending its meaning beyond that found in the gospel without giving us any explanation as to why.

My sense is to be cautious here, and simply admit that we don’t know with any certainty what sin John is talking about (although I think the evidence tends to point in the direction of the apostasy of a professing Christian). At the very least, we must say what John says. There is a sin which leads to death, and that sin may very well be tied to the unpardonable sin (as in the gospels), or perhaps to the sin of lying to God (as recounted in Acts 6 with the case of Ananias and Sapphira who lied to the Holy Spirit, and were struck dead. John doesn’t say what it is, so we need to leave it at that with two caveats. The first is that any Christian who is afraid that they’ve committed such a sin, hasn’t. This sin can only be committed by those who are too hard of heart to worry about having committed it. The second caveat is given us by John himself in verse 17, “*all wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.*” All violations of God’s law (in thought, word, and deed) are sin, and we must repent of them and seek forgiveness. All sin is to be taken seriously and must be confessed.

Given John’s warning, in verses 18-20, John once again seeks to ensure that his readers have assurance of their salvation, and that he’s not been referring to them when he speaks of a sin which leads to death. “*We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.*”

As he wraps up, John returns one final time to his familiar refrain—God’s people are not to be characterized by sinful behavior. This time John adds that God will protect all those whom he has made alive, for whom Christ has died, and for whom Jesus presently intercedes. We need not live in fear. The whole world may be under control of the evil one (or at least it may seem that way to us, as I take John to be speaking rhetorically here, not literally), yet we know we are from God. Echoing the great declaration from Isaiah 44 (part of which, we read as our Old Testament lesson) there is only one God, and his son Jesus has come in the flesh, revealing to us that God is one and that Jesus Christ is true God and eternal life. This is the message which gives us true understanding and the kind of knowledge grounded in the unshakable facts associated with God’s entrance into human history in the person of his son Jesus—the eternal word, manifest in the flesh. Indeed, Jesus was manifest in the flesh so that we might know and understand these things that God does to save us from our sins.

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<sup>4</sup> Stott, The Epistles of John, 192-103.

**A**nd then in verse 21, we find one last closing comment, a kind of apostolic after-thought if you will. Oh, and by the way, “*Little children, keep yourselves from idols.*”

John concludes this epistle with his affectionate address—“little” or “beloved children.” God will keep us from the evil one, but we must now in turn keep ourselves from idols. This warning flows out of everything John has just written to assure us. God alone is the true God, and Jesus is his Son who came in the flesh. John pleads with his reader not to turn around and undo all of this by returning to the dumb idols from which Jesus came to liberate us. [Jesus] *is the true God and eternal life.*” Any other religious claim or secret knowledge is therefore false. This is why we are to do as John says, and not to foolishly give up what we know to be true (Christ’s incarnation) in exchange for what some deluded false teacher imagines to be true—pagan religion and idolatry.

Beloved, let us end on that note which John has been emphasizing throughout these final chapters. We belong to God who gave us life in Christ. And this Jesus is the true God and eternal life. John testifies about this Jesus so that *we may know that we have eternal life.* And because we know that we know, let us strive with the confidence of God’s favor in Christ to obey God’s commands, love our brothers and sisters, resist the pull of the world and oppose the spirit of antichrist which is in the world already.