

**An Introduction to John's First Letter:
The Epistle of Christian Certainty**

"These things have I written unto you who believe ... that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13)".

Review

Introduction, 1:1-4

John begins with what the original disciples understood about Jesus' person and accomplishments. Only God can bring to life out of death, and He did that. The sin-problem has been judicially adjudicated (standing) and its practical application now being worked out in our lives daily (state). At the end of the journey, our standing and state will be perfection.

The Reality of Fellowship: Stated, 1:5-2:2

Our perfection awaits us because God's promises to us are sure. We have been clothed in the righteousness of our Savior, but our final redemption is on the horizon! Until then our sin natures are very much operative.

"If we say that we say we have not sin, we are deceiving ourselves... (1:8)."

If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar... (1:10)."

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful...to forgive and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1:9)."

The Reality of Fellowship: Tested, 2:3-5:20

John's point is that we do know God though we are not yet delivered from Adam's plague. He responds with five proofs of a gracious work of God in our lives. While perfection is not in our grasp, the habit pattern of our life in Christ proof

The test of obedience, 2:3-17

The test of fidelity to the apostle's teachings, 2:18-29

The test of moral purity, 3:1-4:6

The test of love, 4:7-21

Today's Lesson: The Test of Faith, 5:1-17

Of the five tests of genuine profession, the apostle comes now to faith, the last; it is the apex of his argument. Faith, love, and obedience are the natural fruits of a supernatural rebirth just as faith and love are the evidence of the mutual indwelling of God with His people.

The Evidence of Faith vv. 1-5

Love, vv. 1-2

The fact, v. 1

It is important to grasp the tenses of the verbs: “believes” is present tense meaning continuous action. “Is born” is perfect tense and passive mood (“has been born”), a previous action with continuation. This shows that believing is not the cause of the new birth; it is the consequence of it! If a person believes to be saved (a consequent reality), it is hard to escape the charge that faith is rewarded, and we can boast before the Lord. The present, continuous action is the result of the new birth. If we are in a state of believing, it is evidence that we have been born again.

“Believing” in John has as its object Jesus Christ. Only once does he use the word to indicate a system of belief (5:4).

Belief and love for others are linked just as Christ and the Father are inseparable.

Does faith precede the new birth or does rebirth precede faith? The answer is the same for both questions—no. The fact that they occur simultaneously is proof that rebirth is a miracle. In the natural world two connected events cannot occur at the same time; we live in a world of sequence. Such order does not limit the supernatural world. When heaven touches the earth, two things or more can occur simultaneously. This is what we call a miracle and that is what the new birth.

The test, v. 2

Love and obedience are inseparable just as true faith, love, and obedience intertwine.

How can we fulfill the commandment to love all of God's people when we know so few of them? Answer: Obedience has ramifications none of us know just as disobedience has a ripple effect that none of us can fathom.

Obedience, v. 3

The test, v. 3a

Again, love and obedience are links in the same chain (“by this we know”). Conversely, a lack of obedience is a lack of love.

The delight, v. 3b

The Bible does not say that obedience is easy; it says that obedience is a “delight.” We know that because God is all wise and all loving, He would not command our harm. The word “burdensome” means grievous or irksome. We know that God has our best interest in mind!

Victory, vv. 4-5

The “victory” John speaks of here is not empowerment for an exceptionally successful, spiritual life. It is about triumph over the world system or values; it is the lot of every Christian. We can keep the commandments of God for two reasons: the rebirth—a new perspective of things—and persistent faith. Our faith in God has caused us to value less what we once esteemed highly.

Note. In these verses that he repeats the phrase, “overcomes the world,” three times. It is present tense; it is an ongoing reality. What does he refer to as the cause of our overcoming? Our rebirth! A change in our priorities! We have come to see the world of false values that once glittered like gold as tarnished fools’ gold!

The Fact of Faith, vv. 6-12

The previous paragraph (vv. 1-5) begins and ends with the same topic, belief or faith. This paragraph states historic grounds of our faith. There it was stated that faith overcomes; it brings triumph over the world of false values. John now turns to the object of this victorious faith.

The object of faith, vv. 6-8

Declared, v. 6

The object of faith is Jesus; He is identified by “water and blood” with an emphasis on sacrifice. These have been understood as events in Christ’s life. Ancient commentators, such as Augustine, refer the phrase to the liquids that came from Christ at Calvary. Notice the text says “came ‘by’ or ‘through.’” This concerns how we recognized Him as being from heaven. Water from His side does not seem to indicate His origins. It would seem more appropriate to refer to His baptism when God said, “This is my beloved Son.” The blood would refer to Calvary. The baptism and the cross signify the beginning and end of His earthly ministry, respectively. (See Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22).

Confirmed, v. 7

The Holy Spirit confirms to God's children in the experience of redemption that Christ is the Savior of the world.

This verse does not appear in the best of our most ancient manuscripts. It first appeared in a fourth century Old Latin manuscript and in the eighth century in the Latin Vulgate. Erasmus included it in his sixteenth century critical text (1516) and from it into the Authorized Version (KJV, 1611).

Summarized, v. 8

Events in Christ's ministry point to His divine origin as well as the conforming ministry of the Spirit. Note the confirmation of the divine Trinity of God: the Father witnessed about Him at His baptism, the Son in His work, and the Spirit in confirming these truths to our hearts.

John speaks of three witnesses, the Scriptures speak of two, to emphasize an indisputable point.

The Context of Faith, vv. 9-12

The witness of God to Christ, v. 9

The tense of the verb, "has borne," indicates abiding validity; God bore witness to His Son and that witness continues.

The surety of faith, v. 10

"To receive" the testimony of God is the same as "to believe (John 1:12)."

The "witness" within is the confirming teaching of the Holy Spirit disclosing Christ to our hearts. Genuine faith entails factual data, validity of that knowledge, and trust or commitment.

The content of faith, v. 11

"God has given" implies that faith is a gift to us. This "eternal life" came through His Son. Jesus, in His life and death, and brought to us the life of God!

Note: Eternal life is not a prize to be won (It is not an achievement); it is a gift.

Eternal life is only found in God's Son; it was achieved for us.

This gift of eternal life is a present possession; it will always be ours.

Conclusion, v. 12

To know God as He has revealed Himself in and through Christ is to possess the life of God. See John 3:36.

The Results of Faith, vv. 13-17

Assurance of life, v. 13

A heartfelt trust in the One whom God sent into this world—the One witnessed by the Spirit, the One who died to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:2, 4:1)—is all we are called to recognize. Faith is the victory that overcomes the world! The NEB (New English Bible) translates the verse this way, “The letter is to assure you that you have eternal life.”

Confidence in prayer, vv. 14-17

A second thing John desires his readers to learn is that in knowing God, we know that as a Father He listens to us.

Stated, vv. 14-15

Prayer is not a convenient device for imposing our will on God or bending His will to ours, but it is the proscribed way of subordinating our will to His. It is in prayer that we see God’s will, align with it, and rest in it. See 1 John 3:22. If we pray according to His will, the certainty is immediate; the actuality may be in the future.

Illustrated, vv. 16-17

These verses elucidate two things stated in the previous verse: God hears our prayers and He answers prayer in accordance to His will. Not every prayer gets a positive answer although they are all answered.

Note: What is a sin not leading to death as opposed to sin that does?

Scholars over the years have generally proposed three options.

A specific sin. For example, Tertullian, a third century churchman, claimed that the sins of murder, adultery, blasphemy, and idolatry fall under this category. From this distinction, the church divided sins into mortal (unforgivable) and venial (minor infractions). There is no biblical warrant for this division; further, according to the Bible, Christians regularly break the commandments because the commandments are understood as heart attitudes.

The sin of apostasy. John has made it clear that a Christian cannot persist in any sin (1 John 3:9). Can a person become the recipient of a gift without contingency, strings or requirements, and lose it by contingency? If God grants something that He desires to give us by His infinite power and provision in Christ, can we forfeit it by a finite purpose? (See 1 John 4:4).

Willful, habitual sinning. It is the action of an unbeliever. Notice the following: in the first part of verse 16, the word “brother” refers to one sinning for whom we should pray. In the second part of verse 16, the

person for whom we are not to pray is not called a brother; this person is neither named nor described. Second, the difference between a believer's and an unbeliever's sinning is that for the latter it is habitual, the absence of any contrary principal, and the lack of Godly sorrow when discovered. Who would this be? Cain, Saul, Judas, Pilate, Hitler. Third, the fact that John uses a present participle seems to indicate a sinful course, rather than an action. If the referent was a "brother," John uses the term for the relationship of a non-believer to another (1 John 2:9, 11).

The point of verse 17 is that though there is sin unto death and sin not unto death, we should not minimize the gravity of sin. Even sin that we commit, though not unto death, is serious for us.

Thoughts

1. Our faith in God is a gift from God (5:1). We did not believe to be saved. God revealed His Son to us, and we believed. It was a miracle whose sequential parts cannot be chronologically arranged because they occurred together and immediately.
2. The great evidence that we are the children of God is that we have in some minor way the character of our "Parent." It is not the degree of our conformity to God's character that is the issue; it is the fact of it.
3. We are people who know that God's commands are best for us.
4. All Christians have victory because faith is the victory. Victory over the world is in knowing that its glittering values are empty and destructive. That is faith (5:4-5).
5. It is our faith that embraces the Savior; it is not our faith that causes the Savior to appear to be precious to us (5:4).
6. God bases His promise to us on His character. If we embrace the message God has given of His Son (at his baptism and at Calvary) by His Spirit, we can be assured that we are His children.
7. If we ask in God's will, we will always get an affirmative answer!
8. There is no sin a believer can ever commit that will separate him or her from the life of God (5:16).
9. Prayer is a powerful thing in the will of God (5:16).
10. All sin is equally grievous to God, but the sin of the saint is not to death because God's Son has paid our death penalty.