

Three Certain Experiences

1 John 5:18-21 We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him. ¹⁹ ¶ We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one. ²⁰ ¶ And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. ²¹ Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

A number of years ago there was a hit song called 'what I am'. Some of the lyrics went like this:

"I'm not aware of too many things,
but I know what I know if you know what I mean.
Philosophy is the talk on a cereal box.
Religion is the smile on a dog.
I'm not aware of too many things,
but I know what I know if you know what I mean.
Choke me in the shallow water before I get too deep.
What I am is what I am.

The songwriter Edie Brickell talked about how she came to write those words. "In a world religion class, everyone was complicating life and existence by over-thinking. I had this sense it's right here, right now. It's who we are and what we feel. It's not this tangled web of psychology and philosophy. I was driving to band practice and started singing that song. I wanted to be real, not adopt some philosophy or role. Instinct is our driving force."

She really is representative of a lot of modern people, if not most. There really is nothing certain, except your own feelings. There is nothing out there except chaos. Don't look for answers or certainty in religion or philosophy. Look inside yourself, be true to yourself, make yourself happy, that's all the certainty you can ask for.

People today have given up on looking for things that are certain. They are sceptical that anything is certain or true. And the word which seems to reflect this attitude is 'whatever'. There's no point, no use, nothing stable, certain or permanent. It's all kind of meaningless, so why don't we just embrace the chaos, embrace the meaninglessness, and lose ourselves in our own choice of entertainment, pleasure, leisure or other distracting thing.

In contrast to all this, the Bible offers man certainty. The Bible teaches us that those who come to know the living God through Jesus Christ become like an anchored boat in a raging storm. They don't just have faith in their faith, or try to feel that they have private, spiritual connection to a higher being. Christians come to know and experience a certainty that is rooted in a real, living person.

So this whole book has been about describing that experience. John has taken time to catalogue and describe what it looks like for God, the Creator of life, to enter you, and be in union with you, and give you His life. Like a doctor listing symptoms, John has been showing you what the patient with the condition known as eternal life looks like.

Chapter 5:13 says just that:

1 John 5:13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

John says – I've written this book to Christians – those who believe in the name of the Son of God – , so that you may be absolutely certain that you have eternal life. How? By comparing your life and

experience with John's description of what it looks like. And if that is true of you, then John has also written to encourage and exhort you to continue to believe. Assurance and endurance are the two themes of this book.

As John closes his book, he ends on these high notes of assurance and endurance: what we have come to know, and what we continue to do because of that. He is going to summarise the whole book for us by restating all that he has said in three different ways.

This passage gives us three undeniable experiences of a believer. John is going to say 'we know' three times, and he means the 'knowing' both of the head and of the heart. A true Christian has come to know something internally. These three experiences are really restatements of what it means to have eternal life. John is going to finish the book saying, this is what a believer experiences, and this is what we continue to do.

I. We Have Been Given a New Nature (3:4-10)

1 John 5:18 We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.

What is the first undeniable, absolutely certain experience of a Christian? He has been born of God. God has fathered him. Like God breathed into Adam a living soul, so the Christian has experienced a new beginning. The Christian is born again. God begets a child, and the child is like his Father. And that means the child, the Christian, has the same relationship to sin that the Father has.

God has no sin at all. Therefore, someone with the new nature is going to be like his or her Father. Now John does not mean that Christians never sin. In fact, in chapter 1:8, 10, he warned against saying we have no sin nature, or that we have not sinned. No, John knows sin still wars against us. The point is, true Christians, those with eternal life within, have a new nature that wants to please God and sin less.

The true experience of a Christian is to experience this kind of war, this tug of war for and against sin that was not there before. Certainly unbelievers have a conscience and sense right from wrong, but unbelievers really have one inclination – that is to do what they want to do. Pleasing self is what drives the engine.

Before we are saved we are like 100 cars released from the top of a hill, all without brakes. Now this car may go this way, and this one may go that way, and the drivers may choose different streets to direct the momentum of the car down, but none of them have the power to stop the car itself. The unbeliever may direct his or her selfishness differently from others, but there is no other nature calling on him or her to please God.

But God wants true Christians to know that they have a new nature from Him that does not have to sin. One of the big leaps forward in your Christian life is when you count what God says about you to be true. God says, you have my nature in you, and if you count it to be true by faith and do not feed the flesh, my new nature within you will not sin. Count it to be true.

When someone is newly married, she has to get used to her new surname. But she can take that card, with her husband's surname and use it. She can count on it being true. Believers can count it to be true that they have a new nature from God which hates sin, and bank on that in times of temptation.

Have you ever noticed how people will use their ethnic nature to justify something? Someone will say, "He's got a real fiery Irish temper" or "I can't help it. It's the hot-headed Spanish blood in me." Or maybe, "He's got that German perfectionism" "I'm Zulu, therefore I'm proud and stubborn." Now, regardless of whether those things are true or not, it shows that we often think of our natures as affecting our behaviour. The Bible says, we believers know, know with certainty that we have been born of God and do not sin habitually. I have my Father's nature, is what we are to be saying.

That's why John goes on to say, "*but he who has been born of God keeps himself,*"

Now some translations are going to render that so it seems like the one born of God is Christ, who keeps the believer, but the majority of Greek manuscripts make it clear that it is the believer who keeps himself. Not in his own power or strength. But once we know what our nature is, we do the things this book has told us to do. We confess our sins. We obey God's commands. We abide in Christ. (1:5-2:6; 2:28-3:10; 3:20-24; 5:14-17). Even though we have God's nature, we keep fighting sin. Like someone who has been immunised, we still keep fighting against infection and disease.

Christians, as we've learned through this book, keep their consciences tender. They do not allow sin to make a home in their lives. Israel was told to not allow the Canaanites to dwell in the land that Israel was coming into lest they corrupt them. Because they did not obey God, but allowed so many of the tribes of Canaan to remain, within a generation after Joshua, Israel was enslaved to those nations and their gods. Christians keep themselves, and guard against sin's encroachment. They do not allow habits of sin to get a foothold in their lives.

Proverbs 4:23 says, "*Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life.*"

Christians, realise that all you watch and hear and do is something that enters you. Whatever you partake in is brought into your mind and being. So Christians keep themselves. They are watchful over what comes in, because the Spirit of God now lives in there. Christians now abide in Christ and He in them, and therefore they do not want Him grieved.

Therefore, Christians don't allow sin to come in and become a boarder. Christian, is there anything in your life which you know God has been convicting you about and it is starting to look like a habit?

Perhaps the habit of laziness, or the habit of overeating, or the habit of indiscreet TV watching, or the habit of gossip on Facebook, or the habit of impatience, or the habit of fear, or the habit of criticism. If so, confess it, abide in Christ. Put on His commands.

When Christians, with new natures, keep themselves from sin, John tells us that the Evil one, Satan does not touch us. The word here for 'touch' means to lay hold of, to grab, to seize. Put simply, holy Christians are too slippery for Satan. He cannot get hold of them, slow them down, distract them, and otherwise keep them from living for God's glory (2:12-14).

Satan is a real person. He is a fallen creature of God, and he lives to see God shamed and frustrated. That is his goal, futile as it is. But Satan is real, and wants to get his claws into a Christian. Since he cannot take away your eternal life, he can at least try to take away your testimony, take away your usefulness.

Eternal life is the real experience of a new nature that keeps the fight against sin going, and therefore experiences victory over Satan. But eternal life, being a Christian is not merely a new nature; it is also a new family.

II. We Have Entered a New Family (3:1, 3:2, 3:9-10, 4:4, 6, 5:1)

We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.

John now brings up the second major experience, which he has repeated again and again. Christians are of God – that is, they have a new Father and a new family. Christians have moved from being part of the world, to being part of God's church. Throughout this book, John has told us that we now have brothers and sisters, under our Father.

Opposite to this family is another group – the world. Here John says “*and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one*”

What he means by this is that the whole world system, its values, its ambitions, its conception of what the 'good life' is, its desires and pleasures, are ultimately master-minded by Satan himself. You've heard the story that frogs thrown into boiling water will jump out, but frogs who are placed in water that is slowly heated up to boiling point will die? So Satan creates a whole environment made up of the media, and the economy, and the entertainments and the leisure and the politics, and the economics that slowly heats up the water so that sin seems normal and righteousness seems strange.

The experience of a Christian is that he senses he belongs to a new group. The more he identifies with the new group; the world dislikes him and refuses to listen to him. The world hates us and does not hear us (3:1, 13, 4:5)

I remember the strange feeling I had towards my school friends and even family after coming to Christ in faith. I still loved them, but I felt a kind of distance between them and me. I knew something had happened to me, something had changed in me that had not changed in them. I felt almost as if I had a terrible secret. I had stepped out of their group, though I was still there.

The true experience of salvation, of eternal life is the feeling of belonging to God's family with kinship with his people and a sense of alienation from the world.

But just like your new nature doesn't guarantee you will not sin, so your new family doesn't guarantee you will not be worldly. So John says the continuing action of the Christian is to no longer love the world, and to love God's people instead (2:7-11; 2:15-17; 3:11-19; 4:7-5:3).

That's been a major theme of this book. Believers have changed families. Therefore they choose to not love the world system, and choose to plant their flag with God's people.

Worldliness is when we breathe in the spirit of the age without the gas mask of God's Word. We uncritically take in its values, desires, goals and morals. And if we do not combat worldly thinking with a renewed mind, we slowly begin to love what the world loves, and hate what the world hates.

If you are of God, then you must actively guard against worldliness. Worldliness seeps into us as we watch those soapies; as we watch the talk shows with their new age spirituality and self-help psychology; as we watch the sitcoms re-arrange our view of family and sex and gender roles; as the films re-shape our view of righteousness, justice, truth, goodness and beauty; as we read the columns, the web forums, the blogs, the apparently inspirational emails. We read the men's and women's magazines and they reset our priorities of what we need to pursue. As we spend excessive time on Facebook and other social networking sites, which can be used well, but very easily become

an exercise in comparing lifestyle and success and number of friends and favourite movies and pop groups; the company you keep and its conversations; the leisure activities you enjoy and the values they create; the time you spend at the mall. The world wants you to conform. And being social beings, we don't like to stick out. We may find ourselves attempting to fit in, to dress like the world, to use its words, to watch what it is watching, or to speak its language. If you are always trying to impress the world, you will end up speaking with its accent.

Remember Lot? He began pitching his tents towards Sodom. The next thing he was in it. The next thing he had a house in it. In the end, he had to be torn away from it when God was about to destroy it. This is why God says don't love the world. Don't befriend it. Of course, love your neighbour. Love your enemies. But do not love what they love.

To help us remember that we no longer belong to this system, God insists that every believer attend the funeral service of that part of you which identified with the world. That funeral service is your baptism. There you say to the watching family of God – the part of me that loved the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, has died with Christ. The person that comes up and out of the water to greet you – I am of God. I am in His family. I am one of you.

And then, as John has repeatedly told us, we love the brethren. We love them. We serve them - materially, physically and spiritually. We pray for one another. We lay down our lives for one another.

Sometimes it is hard for Christians, who have had so many friends and good times in the world, to really get in with God's people. They seem strange. They seem aloof. And my encouragement to you is this: if you emigrated to a new country, and knew nobody there, you would simply have to get out there and meet the locals. Get out there, get involved. Walk up to people and introduce yourself. Set up times to have people over. If others seem aloof, then you be humble, and get the ball rolling. When God's people break the ice, they find they have more in common with one another than any relationship they ever had in the world. They share Christ.

When Christians keep on loving each other and not loving the world, they become what they are: overcomers of the world. (4:4, 5:5)

This is the experience of eternal life. A new nature, like God's, which wants to sin less and be like Christ; a new family to love, and separation from the old family. The third thing which eternal life brings is the greatest of all.

III. We Have a New Relationship With God (1:1-4; 4:13-19; 5:6-12; 5:1, 5)

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. ²¹ Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

John tells us that an external, historical event has produced an internal result. Jesus Christ has come, lived, died, risen and ascended. This fact has given us a new understanding. Our eyes have opened. The light has gone on. What do we now know? The lights go on. It makes sense. All at once – we see – He is the True One. There is only one truth – only one true God. And we know Him. Not merely know about Him. We know Him, and we find ourselves in Him.

How has Christ's coming done this for us? Well, something real and tangible has occurred.

Historical time-space events have happened that truly change us. The Son entered the human race, born of a virgin, and lived a perfect life. The Son died a death as punishment for others, and rose again. To all who believe this: that He is the Son of God, God's substitute for sinners, God sends His Spirit to dwell inside them and impart the very life of Christ to them.

We have a brand new relationship with God. We know Him. That word *know* takes on a whole new meaning.

John 17:3 "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

So who is this Jesus Christ that we must believe in to know God?

Notice something fascinating in verse 20. It says we are in Him who is True, in His Son Jesus Christ. So who are we in? We are in God, the true One. But we are in His Son Jesus Christ. And then what does the next sentence say? This is the true God and eternal life! Jesus is both a different person from God, and yet identified as also being God. Verse 20 is one of the most important verses in the Bible. Packed into this little verse, we have the full humanity of Jesus Christ, the Deity of Jesus Christ, the Trinity, as well as the gospel.

This is the true God that we have come to know - The one and only Creator God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So once you know the true God, what must you keep yourself from? Keep yourself from idols.

What would idols be? Well, it can mean literal false gods. But remember how often John has warned us about false gospels? He has kept warning us about antichrists who deny Christ's humanity or His deity, or His Son ship (2:18-27; 4:1-6). If you imbibe a false gospel, it leads you to idolatry. We must beware of cultists and apostates, particularly in an Internet-era.

How do we keep believing in the true gospel? Keep hearing the Gospel. Keep having it preached to you, Keep reading it. Keep celebrating it – the Lord's Supper.

In truth, anything in your life that you end up worshipping, anything that you end up loving for itself, loving like a god in which you place your trust ultimately, this is a false god and therefore an idol.

You see, John requires something radical. If you truly believe you have come to know the true God, then He can be your only God. Nothing must be as important to you as your love for God. No one and nothing should compete for first place in your affections. We must not settle for ourselves in the centre, and Christ being one of the planets that orbit us.

No. If God is the true God, then He belongs absolutely supreme in our priorities and desires and goals and ambitions. Do you remember that scene where Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal? He wasn't speaking to Gentiles. He was speaking to Israelites who had adopted syncretism. They had decided that Yahweh, was to be one god among many, maybe even the best god or the traditional god, or the national god, but not the **only** god. And what had God demanded right at the top of the 10 commandments? No other god. Why? Because there isn't any other. And once you have found the true one, idolatry is idiotic. That's why Elijah said to them,

1 Kings 18:21 And Elijah came to all the people, and said, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people answered him not a word.

We must actively guard against syncretism. Christians are in danger of turning good things into bad things by how much they value them, or by how tightly they hold them. Family. Work. Education. Bodily Health. Companionship. The good life.

So, if you have come to know God this way, then you need to keep living a Christ-Centred life. You must abide in Christ, that is, feed on Him. Strengthen your link to Christ by feeding on His Word, communing with Him in prayer, worshipping Him with His body, loving His Body, testifying of Him to others. We must use every means at our disposal to strengthen this link.

Once you are truly born again, you are like iron. Iron is a magnetic metal and is attracted by a magnet. If you keep using a magnet on it, it gains magnetic properties itself. However, it loses it if it isn't again exposed to the magnet. We're like that. With new natures we are drawn to Christ. Unbelievers are like wood to a magnet. But even though we have new natures, we must spend time communing with Him, knowing Him, allowing Him to control us, fill us and magnetise us with His character, so that when we go about our day, we have the magnetic character of Christ.

The result will be, as verse 13 put it, we will continue to believe on the name of the Son of God.

This is eternal life – Christ in you - A new nature, a new family and a new relationship with God.

So we close this book with some self-diagnosis. Top of the list: Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died and rose again for your sins, to reconcile you to God? Have you come to know God as Father, know Him as a Person with a new understanding since receiving Christ? If not – that's where you need to begin. If so, then keep smashing your idols and feeding on Christ.

Second, have you experienced that new nature which inclines you away from sin and towards obedience? If not, you probably need to repent and believe in Christ as your Lord. If so, then keep confessing your sin, and fighting it, and never letting it settle into a habit, and obeying God out of love.

Third, have you experienced a sense of transfer from one family to another? If not, you may need to tell God you want to join His family, and are willing to repent and turn away from the world. If so, then keep guarding your heart from the world, being careful what things you love. Keep growing in love and bonds with God's family.

In this confused, uncertain temporary world, 1 John offers you certainty and permanence. It's receiving Jesus Christ as your life.