

Reliable Signs of Genuine Salvation

1 John 2:12-14

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Steve DeWitt

I have here in my hands one of my most prized possessions. This is a handwritten letter dated August 1986. It was written to me by my dad. Before I went to college, he took me on a father/son excursion. We got Kentucky Fried Chicken and went to a park and sat on a bench. We ate chicken and talked about life.

He said he had something he wanted to read to me. He pulled out this letter and read it choking with emotion. It was a letter preparing me for my new stage of life. He told me how proud he was of me and gave me advice about college, friends, and women. There are places in the letter where his tears stained the letters. Most of all he wanted me to know that he loved me.

I have kept this letter safe and sound for 27 years. If you have ever been blessed to receive a letter from a parent or mentor or coach or teacher who you looked up to, you know what this can mean. If in the letter they say they believe in you, that you have what it takes, that they are proud of how far you have come, then you know how reassuring loving exhortations can be.

In our study of 1 John we have seen many statements from John that leave us quivering. Are we actually saved or not? John has said: NOT if you walk in darkness, NOT if you think you are without sin, NOT if you fail to keep his commands. And there are strong words ahead in 1 John. Next week, if we love the world, God's saving love isn't in us...and there's more after that.

In 2:12-14, John pauses to reassure his people that he has seen reliable signs of true salvation in them. Like my dad's letter, his exhortations are reassuring.

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. (1 John 2:12-14)

What is clear is that John is writing to three groups: children, fathers, and young men. He gives an exhortation to each, then returns to the children and does it again. Children, fathers, and young men. Who is he referring to? Who are the children, fathers, and young men? Most of the ink written about this passage is spent trying to identify who they are. There is intrigue here. There's no middle age referred to. Why are they only males? Young men. Fathers. No females mentioned. That is something that my wife Jennifer's and my soon-to-arrive daughter will wonder too.

There are a couple of possibilities. He could be describing stages of life. The children were the youngest chronologically and the fathers were the oldest. He could be describing stages of spiritual maturity. Children were the new believers, young men were the not-so-new, and the fathers were the long-term Christians. There are a few other variations on these ideas.

In the end, we simply don't know for sure. I lean toward the stages of spiritual maturity and will teach this from that perspective.

What we do know is that John is describing authentic Christianity and reliable signs of salvation by contrasting it to the teaching and lifestyle of the false teachers and those who followed them. I'd rather focus on the signs than the stages, as the signs are John's emphasis. So rather than fret about the categories of Christians we find here, let's see them as categories of assurance.

Reliable Signs of Salvation

New believers: forgiveness of sins and the true knowledge of God

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake... I write to you, children, because you know the Father. (1 John 2:12, 13)

Forgiveness of sins and the knowledge of God. How do those sound as a basic starting point for real Christianity?

Forgiveness of sins is foundational to the gospel and the whole of Christianity. There is so much in that little phrase. Sin implies moral accountability. Sin infers guilt. Sin speaks of Someone against whom we have sinned. Sin means there is a moral standard, and if there is a moral standard, there is a moral standard Maker. Forgiveness of sins is a must-have starting point for genuine Christian experience. Can anyone be saved without an awareness of sin and forgiveness?

Remember that the false teachers were saying that sin was no big deal. Sin didn't need to be forgiven but could rather be celebrated. They would even claim to be without sin as an ongoing reality in their lives.

A true Christian's starting point is guilt for sin and a faith embrace of Jesus dying for it. In 1 John 1:7 he says Jesus' blood *cleanses us from all sin*. In 2:2 he said that Jesus is the *propitiation for our sins*. His death was the offering that turned God's wrath into favor. If there is an irreducible element in the truly saved, it is the awareness and acknowledgment of sin and the experience of forgiveness of that sin through faith in Christ. Genuine Christian experience starts there. Sin and forgiveness.

The gospel is not a path to personal fulfillment. It is not a path to political revolution. It is not first or foremost about bringing justice into the world. *It is a sinner finding personal freedom from personal guilt through personal faith in Jesus*. Massive implications follow, but that's the starting point. John is saying, "New Christians, I write to you for you have experienced real forgiveness."

A second basic ingredient is knowing God. John has skewered the false teachers for their claims to know God but their moral lives continue to be lived in darkness.

But to these new believers he says, *You really do know God as Father*. There is wonderful encouragement in just these two statements. Forgiveness of sins and knowing God. Sometimes we think that to know we are saved we have to have all kinds of knowledge and be able to explain the mysteries of deep theology. We're all for deep theology like the local school system is for trigonometry. Not knowing it doesn't mean first graders aren't students, and not grasping Trinitarian theology doesn't mean you're not a Christian.

Children are learning the basics. In Christianity, the essential truths are so simple that even actual children can understand them.

Over the years I have had the personal privilege of ministering with Child Evangelism Fellowship. CEF began in 1937 after Jesse Overholtzer read a quote from Pastor Charles Spurgeon. Spurgeon said, "A child of five, if properly instructed, can as truly believe and be regenerated as an adult."

Mr. Overholtzer thought, "If that is true, I'll give my life to helping children understand God and be saved." Now the ministry reaches millions of children a year with the gospel. Do they start with hypostatic union of Jesus or predestination? No. They start with God and forgiveness of sins through Jesus.

Aren't you glad God didn't make this complicated? Even children can understand a holy God, sin, and forgiveness through Jesus. If children can understand this, that means any of us can. How about you? Are you allowing some obscure question to keep you from embracing the simple and understandable? God is holy. We are sinners. Jesus died for our sins. All who repent and believe will have their sins forgiven and enter into a real relationship with God.

Children, you may need to explain this to the adults in your life. Feel free to do so if you sense they need help.

Spiritually mature: treasuring Christ

I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. (1 John 2:13)

I am taking these in the order John gives them. On the other end of the spiritual journey are those who are spiritually mature. John calls them *fathers*. They too know forgiveness of sins. They know God. They continue to embrace and treasure the basics of forgiveness and knowing God. John calls spiritual maturity "knowing him who is from the beginning." Who is that?

If we look back to the start of the letter in 1 John 1:1, John describes someone as "that which was from the beginning," which we have heard and seen and touched. The Word of Life. He is describing Jesus there. I think he is referring to him here as well. The spiritually mature really know Christ.

This lines up with Christian experience as well. A new Christian will understand to a point the character of God and the person and work of Jesus. "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." That's a great starting point.

The spiritually mature have gone far beyond that to know and understand and treasure the glory of Christ in a much fuller way; the kind of treasuring that time and trials and clinging to him in the good and the bad times create.

Please note that spiritual maturity is not necessarily being a Christian who is old chronologically. Spiritual maturity is a Christian who deeply knows and treasures Christ. I don't care how long you've been a Christian, if "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so" pretty much reflects the maturity of your heart, you are spiritually still a child. God doesn't measure us by our age or stage, but by whether we know Christ and have come to love him for the majesty of his character and glory.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:7-11)

Who talks like that? Spiritual fathers do. They've lived life. They've experienced things. They've seen through the shallows and shadows of this world, and to them, knowing Christ is the ultimate. *The surpassing worth or greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*

When you come across a true father like this, do what you can to get around them. Listen to them. Hear the stories of God's grace in their lives. Fathers, we are thankful for you.

Spiritual adolescents: strength, the Word of God, victory over the evil one

I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. (1 John 2:14)

John has the most to say to this category. It's easy to see why. This is where most of us live. Some of us are new believers, some of us are mature believers, but most of us are running the middle laps of the race. These are the hard ones. They also are the ones that most reveal whether our faith is real or not. Lots of apparent Christians quit during the middle laps. So John gives three signs of genuine salvation in the middle laps of life: spiritual strength; the Word of God active within us; and victory over the evil one. I think these are all interrelated and interdependent.

Like our physical lives, spiritual adolescence is a time of **strength**. They are the days when everything is working as it should. I remember pondering around age 20 whether I was physically as good as I would ever be. My dad affirmed it with these depressing words: "It's pretty much all downhill from here."

Spiritually, strength is not muscles or cardio but the exercise of faith in the day-to-day of life. What a wonderful season of faith it is! God is changing us as we integrate our faith into the categories of our lives. The Lordship of Jesus is being increasingly reflected in all areas of life. Like teenage boys, we are changing and growing stronger. There are defeats along the way, but victory as well over past habits and temptations. We are overcoming the evil one and his destructive ways.

Let me focus on what it says about the role of **the Word of God**. *The Word of God abides in you*. What does that mean? To abide is to dwell. I abide in my house. I live there. God's Word abides in us as we make it our authoritative guide. As the Psalmist writes, *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.* (Psalm 119:105) The Bible is God's Word and God uses it to grow us spiritually. John connects it to **victory over the evil one**.

An obvious example of this is Jesus in his temptations. Matthew 4 records that Jesus went out into the desert and fasted for 40 days. Then Satan came to him and tempted him three times with specific temptations to set aside God the Father's plan for him. In each case, Jesus refutes Satan by quoting and applying Scripture. He overcame the evil one by the Word of God abiding in him.

If there is anything spiritual adolescents need, it's God's Word known and applied to life. We teach God's Word in our church for a reason. We have Bible classes for a reason. We teach our children the Bible for a reason. We blog and podcast and are doing the New City Catechism for a reason.

We are endeavoring to put God's Word here in our hearts so that children will become adolescents and adolescents will become fathers. This is how we grow as Christians. It's not just how we *grow* as Christians, it's also how we *know* we are Christians.

The bottom line is that the real evidences of salvation relate to growth and ongoing change from spiritual immaturity to maturity.

John is going to talk about categories of change just like there are categories of change in young men. They get taller; their voice changes; their muscles strengthen, etc. These are all evidences of life. When there is no change in a child, there is something wrong.

Spiritually, growth means change. We may not do spiritual trigonometry but we "*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*" (2 Peter 3:18) We may continue to struggle with a habit but we want to surrender that area to the Lordship of Jesus. No one may mistake us for Mother Theresa, but the angry people we used to be are now gentler and more humble. Change doesn't save, but it sure can assure as we see ourselves doctrinally, morally, and lovingly putting aside immaturity and moving toward Christlikeness.

1 John calls us to look for those changes as the trustworthy evidence of salvation in us and in others. May all our children become young men and all our young men become fathers.

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