

Unshakable Confidence

1 John 5:18-21

September 7 & 8, 2013
Steve DeWitt

Great works of art, whether literature or film (or really anything telling a story), generally end with inspiration. The heroes win and ride into the sunset. The couple lives happily ever after. *Auntie Em, there's no place like home.* How something ends is really important. The ending puts a period on the whole thing in a way that drives home the point, or the score, or the speech, or the story. Great art ends strong.

Preachers know this too. People tend to remember the first thing and the last thing. I heard good advice years ago: *Tell 'em what you are going to say. Say it. Tell 'em what you said. Sit down.* Good advice.

The Apostle John may have been a fisherman, but he had learned a thing or two about how to communicate effectively and he ends his letter by telling 'em what he said—a summary and final exhortation.

This is not the last message in this series. We have two more. A special one on assurance next week and then a final message from the theme verse 1 John 5:13 to finish it up and pull it all together. Today is 1 John 5:18-21.

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. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. (1 John 5:18-21 ESV)

It doesn't take a Bible scholar to see John's outline here. Each verse begins with the repetition, *We know that*. Verse 18. Verse 19. Verse 20. So John's outline is our outline. Three things we know.

Here is where the written word struggles to communicate. The repetition is for emphasis. One commentator says each verse begins with *a shout of confidence* (David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters*, p. 167).

Notice the context. He has just said that we should pray for one another, especially when we see a brother or sister struggling with a particular sin. Pray for them and God will give them life, repentance, and restoration. This is in the broader context of a letter to assure the genuine Christians at his church that they are actually genuine Christians and under the grace of God. Verse 13 says, *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.* Know. But what do we know? What is the essence of the assuring knowledge? He summarizes it here with three confidences, three "knowings," that are grounded in God and his saving work in us.

Unshakable Confidence in our Walk (God's Work Preserving Us)—V. 18

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.

This is familiar territory in 1 John and he has said this before. We are born of God and because of this, we will not continue in rebellion against God. 1 John 3:6 and verse 9 and lots of other places describe our relationship with God as his children. These are all describing God's miracle in us of re-birthing us spiritually. By nature, we were spiritually dead. By virtue of Jesus' victory over sin and death on the cross and its application to us by faith, God makes us alive. We are born of God. We are given a new nature. The old nature craved sin, always acted out of selfish motives, exuded pride and self-glory. The new nature is born of God and alive to God. It wants what God wants. It wants to live in a way that pleases God.

Most of 1 John is simply the application of that truth and reliable signs of spiritual new birth. In chapter 3 and here in chapter 5, the verb for "sin" means "ongoing sin" or "keep on sinning." Sin will always have a presence in the life of the Christian. However a genuine Christian will not remain in rebellious sin against the will of his heavenly Father. He can't. His nature and his love will eventually not allow it. All God's prodigal sons eventually come home.

This has allowed me to have some fun illustrating this in our series. For example, in 1 John 3:9 NIV when John makes this same point—*No one who is born of God will continue to sin...because they have been born of God*—we talked about the difference between pigs and sheep. Pigs and sheep both get dirty. Both of them can at times be clean but there is a big difference between them. You can clean a pig up, put a bow on his head, brush his teeth, but the moment you give him the opportunity, back to the mud he goes. It's his nature.

A sheep, on the other hand, by nature desires to be clean. However, a sheep will misstep and fall into the mud. Because of stupidity or being ornery, he might mistakenly walk in the muddy field. At times, sheep are as muddy and dirty as pigs. However, a sheep wants to be clean. So pigs can be clean but prefer to be muddy and sheep can be muddy but prefer to be clean. Sheep don't stay muddy. They won't stay in the mud.

John celebrates this here in verse 18; we know that everyone who has been born of God will not stay in the mud of sin. And there are two reasons. *He who was born of God protects him and the evil one does not touch him.* Who is he talking about?

That's simple. He's talking about Jesus and Satan. Jesus actively works by the Holy Spirit, to protect those he has redeemed. Jesus cares about all his "sheep." Listen to his passionate prayer to his heavenly Father in John 17:12-15, *While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.*

Do you think God the Father answers Jesus' prayers? As Eugene Peterson says, *The God-begotten are also the God-protected (The Message)*. Jesus protects us in the sense that he is actively at work in our lives by the Spirit animating our faith, by the Word renewing our minds and hearts, by interceding for us to the Father, and by protecting us from the evil one. He *does not touch us* means Satan cannot gain spiritual victory over us. He can tempt us, discourage us, distract us, compromise us, but he can never ultimately separate us from the life of God through Jesus. Jesus won't let it happen and according to John 10, the Father

is actively preserving us as well, we are in his hand, and no one can snatch us out of his hand (John 10:29).

This produces in us an unshakable confidence. If Jesus himself caught you after the service today and said, "I am personally keeping my eye on you; you're going to make it," how would you feel getting into your car? *Hallelujah!* That's what he is saying to you today.

Unshakable Confidence in our Birth (God's Work Saving Us)—V. 19

We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

This verse is an application of the previous one. If we are born of God, where did we come from? We came from God. Where did our new birth come from? It came from God. Where did forgiveness come from? It came from God. Where did our spiritual adoption come from? It came from God. Where did every spiritual benefit we have come from? It all came from God.

This whole thing is a God thing. If it came from us, think how differently this would feel. We are feeble. We are flimsy. We live, we die. We come, we go. If salvation was of man, what kind of assurance could we possibly have? What has man ever done without messing the whole thing up? Nothing.

But since our salvation is sourced in God, our confidence is sourced in him too. Next week I am going to talk about my own struggle with confidence and assurance of salvation when I thought it was about me. Our salvation from first to last, like everything else, is all about him and from him.

The world rests in the power of Satan, but we rest in the power of God. We are his.

Unshakable Confidence in our Savior (Jesus' Saving Work on our Behalf)—V. 20

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.

John's last "know" is also all about Him, Christ. Here is the crescendo; a Christological statement that puts all our hope where it needs to be—squarely on Jesus. He is the Son of God who has come. He is the one who has given us spiritual understanding. He is God. He is eternal life.

No doubt these are final points of rebuttal to the false teachers who split the church doctrinally and denied key aspects of Jesus' person and work. This is machine gun Christology. Bam. Bam. Bam.

This is such a rich statement of Jesus' identity and saving work on our behalf. Let's enjoy it.

Jesus is the Son of God

The false teachers tried to say he *became* the Christ; Jesus was a good man who assumed Messiahship; blah, blah, blah. No. John says, He is the Son of God; the eternal word as he says in his gospel, who was in the beginning. He was with God and he was God. (John 1:1)

Remove Jesus' sonship and deity and he is not a qualified Savior. Jesus had to be God to be a Savior. If he was only a man, his death could not pay the ransom price for our sin. He had to be God because he himself claimed to be God and if he wasn't, he was a liar, and not a perfect sacrifice for sin.

His whole life and ministry is framed in the context of his relationship with his heavenly Father. If he wasn't the Son of God, all that was theater and fake and we are left without a Savior. Jesus was and is the Son of God.

Jesus has come

This is his incarnation. As Son of God, he existed before time began. But he came, born of the virgin Mary, taking on real human flesh. The first statement is his deity. This one is his humanity. He came into this world and dwelt among us.

John began his letter, *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands...we proclaim also to you!* (John 1:1, 3) John isn't writing as an outsider; he was the ultimate Messianic observer. He was in Jesus' inner circle. He saw the miracles. He was at the cross. He was at the empty tomb. He was in the upper room and was present for many other post-resurrection appearances. He was called the disciple Jesus loved. This eyewitness said, "I saw him. I heard. He was the real deal. God truly did come. His name was Jesus."

Jesus has brought spiritual understanding and fellowship with God

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. (1 John 5:20)

While wonderful, to simply think of what Jesus was doing in terms of forgiveness of sins or redemption is to miss that these are means to an end. Jesus died for our sins SO THAT we can be restored to God. Our sin kept that from happening.

But Jesus perfectly imaged God the Father (Hebrews 1) so that to know Jesus is to know God and through faith in him, to be in fellowship with our Creator.

"It is not only that Christ has revealed the Father by his incarnation, perfect life, atoning death and glorious resurrection, but that through all this he has brought us into the closest possible union with the one true God. By faith, we enter into a relationship that will never end." (David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters*, p. 171.)

This is how Jesus is "eternal life." He is what he provides. There's a restaurant in Chicago named Mr. Taco. Guess what they serve? There's another one called Mr. Greek Gyros. Guess what they serve? Jesus is Mr. Eternal Life. He is eternal and is the source of eternal life for all who believe in him.

The final verse of 1 John says, *Little children, keep yourselves from idols.* (Verse 21) After a letter about false Christians, he concludes with a word about false gods. Idols are anything we love, worship, or look to, to provide what only God can provide. It is a negative statement. Don't love, trust, or believe in idols. Keep yourself from idols means love God supremely.

False gods. False Christians. False teachers. False christs. The whole letter is urging the church to find what is true and real and authentic in a world filled with deceit, lies, and fakes.

In the end, what really makes the difference? Where does our assurance come from?

Assurance of Salvation is Found in the Person of Jesus and the Promise of God

So much of what John has said is to look at our lives, our directions, and our loves as indicators of whether we are born of God or not. But his final word is not to look at us but to look to God. We know God preserves us. We know God birthed us. We know Jesus is Savior. All my self-evaluations about my life and my faith and my loves and my directions, they are all subjective and can be self-deceived. They are helpful but there is one thing most helpful—looking unto Christ. As Robert Murray McCheyne said, “For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ.”

I think much of our struggle with assurance is that we do the opposite. For every look at Christ, we take ten looks at ourselves. What do we see? We see weakness. We see inwardly that we are more selfish, prideful, and worldly than we’d ever post on Facebook or want anyone to know.

I don’t persevere in the faith because I am strong. My moral walk is never good enough. My loves are weak and circumstantial. When my assurance is grounded in any way on me, I will live in terror that I am not saved and facing eternal judgment.

“I looked at Christ and a dove of peace flew into my heart. I looked at the dove and it flew away.” (Charles Spurgeon) John didn’t write that, but he could have. That is what he is saying here. The true God is known through his true Son Jesus, who is the Son of God, and through whom we enter into spiritual fellowship by faith which connects us to the eternal life of God.

So as you search for assurance and if you are struggling to find it, is it your introspection and self-focus or self-obsessive conscience that keeps you from finding it? Don’t look in, look up. Look at Christ ten times for every once at yourself. Look to Christ, *the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him...so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.* (Hebrews 12:2-3)

Look to him and there will come to your soul a dove of peace and assurance to give you unshakable confidence that you are a child of God.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

Additional Scripture quotations taken from *Holy Bible, New International Version®*, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

© 2013 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel’s website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.