

Be Sure: Confident Living from 1 John

That You Know God's Plan of Salvation

1 John 2:28-3:10

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²⁸ And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. ²⁹ If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

¹ See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

⁴ Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵ You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶ No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. ⁸ Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. (1 John 2:28-3:10).

Purpose and Outline

Just to review, the Epistle of John was written by the apostle John, likely in the early 90's A.D. It was probably a circular letter to the churches in Asia, for John had spent the latter years of his ministry in Ephesus.

Why did he write the letter? We do not find specific indication in the text, but 2:19 gives us a clue. There were those who had left the church. Why? Not because of the color of the carpet or the style of worship. There were more substantive issues at stake, and these we can only deduce from what John wrote: who Christ was, how followers of Christ are to live their lives, and even, fundamentally, what salvation was. They were likely teaching an early form of

Gnosticism, which said that salvation came through head knowledge of certain secret facts and that it didn't therefore matter how you lived your life. These people were not content just to keep their beliefs to themselves but became itinerant preachers, going among these churches and propagating their beliefs. As a result, the churches were confused. Some began questioning if they really knew God and whether or not they had eternal life.

John says, "Hold on, we were the ones who saw and heard and touched Jesus (ch. 1), and I'm writing this letter so you can know if you have eternal life (5:13)." He says there are three ways you can know if you have eternal life—three tests, if you will, of a true Christian: belief, life, and love. His writing style is not linear like Paul's, the legal expert, but rather circular, as he comes back to these three main points time and again. This is why his writing might seem repetitive to a western reader. The three tests are doctrinal, moral, and social. Today we're going to focus on the moral or ethical test.

But in case you're worried that this will be another sermon telling you to stop doing bad things (which we should stop doing), our text comes at it from another angle. I found only three imperatives (commands) in the entire section. As Robert Yarbrough said, "The letter is not a list of dos and don'ts. It is rather a manifesto of 'Done!'"

The key verse is 3:5, "He appeared in order to take away sins," so our sermon title is **Be Sure You know God's Plan of Salvation**. We read in 3:7, "Little children, let no one deceive you." This is what I hope happens today for us as well, for is it possible that some of us might be deceived about this most important matter?

The great deception is that sin is not that big of a deal—when really, it's the cancer that is killing the human race. God, who is the Lover of our souls, wants to heal us of the cancer of sin. He wants us to see it for what it is—and to understand His remedy for it. God's plan is to take away every vestige, scrap, sign, smell, hint, remnant of sin in the life of His children. That is why the believer is chosen "out of the world," according to John 17:6, while still being "in the world," according to 1 John 4:17. And the effect of this is a great tension:

¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you (John 15:19).

But while all of this is true, the followers of Jesus are sent into the world:

¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world (John 17:16–18).

This mission is an extension of God's heart for "the world," because John 3:16 tells us that God loved the world and gave His only Son. In other words, God's posture towards the world is love, compassion, and redemption, along with broken-heartedness and grief because of the brokenness and ungodliness.

What is that plan? How can we be cured of this spiritual cancer and live holy lives, free from sin? There are three elements in God's plan.

I. The Father's Love Enables It, vv. 2:28-3:3

John begins this section with the words "Little children," speaking as an elderly pastor, lovingly caring for his flock. But in that phrase is a foretaste of the main point of this section—that they are not just his children in the faith, but that they are children of God.

There is a day coming when He, Jesus, will appear again. The implication is that we each will appear before Him, and we will have one of two reactions: confidence or shame. How can we have confidence on that day? John's answer, in v. 29, is that you have been born of God. If you have been born of God, you will practice righteousness and can be confident on that day. Divine paternity will make all the difference on that day.

What does it mean to be born of God? Jesus once told a religious leader, Nicodemus, that unless he was born again, he could not see the Kingdom of God (John 3:3). Nicodemus couldn't understand this. He asked Jesus how, since he'd already been born once, he could be born again. Jesus explained that it's an analogy and not really that hard to understand. Just like humans give birth to humans, so the Spirit of God can give spiritual birth. The process of conception is different, though. John 1: 12 and 13 says, "To all who receive Him, who believe in His name, they have the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." It is these children of God who can be confident on the day Christ returns.

John now stops, in his epistle, to think about that for a minute. Here is one of the three imperatives in the text: See! Behold! How amazing it is that the holy, all-powerful God should father children from weak, sinful, and rebellious humans like us. See what kind of love He must have had to do this! The word means "of another country," or "out of this world," as in something never seen in these parts before. It is used in Mark 13:1 of the stones of the temple: What massive stones (NIV)! It was not just that they were huge, but that they had never been seen before in these parts. This is the love the Father has for us, His children. And so we are—not just in name or theory—but we are *actually* children of God!

It doesn't end there; there's more coming. In fact, the future for us as the children of the King is so great and bright that it hasn't been fully revealed (3:2). But one thing we know, that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. Like him how? We read in Phil. 3:4 that our bodies will be transformed to be like His glorious body. But the sense here is of moral purity; we will be once and forever done with sin. It will have no more place in our

lives—no attraction, no sting, no power. This is the final stage of God’s plan of salvation, to eradicate sins completely from our lives and make us perfect, just like His Son.

That will happen when we see Him at His appearing. And we read in v. 3 that those who have this hope, even now, begin to purify their lives to get ready to meet Jesus, so there will be no shame at His appearing. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

II. The Son’s Labor Enacts It, vv. 3:4-8

In order for God to accomplish this plan, something had to be done about sin. That’s why He sent His Son, Jesus, into the world. There are two reasons in this section that the Son of God appeared:

1. To take away sins, v. 5.

He came to deal with our greatest problem, to provide a cure for our cancer. And how did He do that? Well, He got to the root of the problem. You see, the wages of sin is death. Because of sin, there will be blood. In order for the sinner to be released from the shackles of sin, there must be a death—either the sinner’s own, or a substitute’s. That’s what Jesus did, as John has already told us in 2:2. His work, His labor, His suffering and death on the cross was the propitiation for our sins, the atoning sacrifice. That is why, when we confess our sins (1:9), He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. He has paid the price and released us from the bondage. A legal transaction happens with those who believe in Him: Our sin is transferred to Him and paid for, and His righteousness (v. 5b) is transferred to us.

2. To destroy the works of the devil, v. 8.

What is the work of the devil? It is to lead us into sin. He did this from the very beginning, when in the Garden of Eden, he led Adam and Eve into sin, and thereby severed their relationship with God. The instant Eve’s teeth bit into that forbidden fruit, a deadly cancer entered the human race. And it has infected every one of her offspring.

Satan’s work is to make cancer look attractive. If you offered me a dish of cancer, I would recoil from it. So, he does it with deception and lies, just like the witch offering Snow White a beautiful apple. He’s been doing it ever since; he tried it with Jesus in the wilderness, and he’s trying to do it today in your life and mine.

God knew that in His great plan of salvation, in order to eradicate sin, He would have to deal with Satan. He did it through the labor of His Son. The record of debt that stood against us, He cancelled by nailing it to the cross (Col. 2:14,15) and thereby disarmed the rulers and authorities by triumphing over them through the cross. And so Jesus bound the strong man and destroyed his work. This is an interesting word; it means to loosen or untie and thereby render powerless. Satan’s schemes keep us

bound in darkness. Jesus, through the cross, disarmed Satan, took away his power, and thus destroyed his work.

The devil is still at his work today. Charles Spurgeon once said, “The devil is at work in you, as a smith at his forge.” He wants you weakened by the cancer of sin, and so he offers it up to you all day long, mixed in various delicious looking recipes.

II. The Spirit’s Life Empowers It, vv. 3:9-10

You may have noticed that we haven’t looked at each phrase in these first two sections. This is why John’s writing style can be hard to follow, kind of all in the skillet meal. But let’s pick out the sausages of this third point and string them together:

2:29, “Everyone who practices righteousness has been born of Him.”

3:4, “Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness.”

3:6, “No one who abides in Him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.”

3:7, “Whoever practices righteousness is righteous”

3:8, “Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil.”

And now 3:9, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning.” Then he ups the ante even more and says, “and he cannot keep on sinning.” Show sentence diagram . . .

Other translations, like RSV and NKJ, have “Whoever has been born of God does not sin . . . and cannot sin . . .” The question is whether this passage is teaching sinless perfection—that once you advance so far in the Christian faith or have a second experience of grace, you reach the point where you literally don’t sin any more. And yet all of these sentences are speaking of every believer—everyone who has been born of God—not a special category. And 1:8 is clear: if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

There is a very significant interpretive question here based on a verb tense. You see, grammar does matter! The answer, I believe, lies in the tense of the verb “to sin.” It’s in the present continuous tense, and so many translators, such as the ESV, take it to be the habitual practice of sin. In this view, what John is saying is that if you are born of God, you will not make sin the habit of your life. In fact, you cannot. And here you, if you’re a follower of Jesus who has been dogged by sin, cry out in your inner recesses, “But I *do* keep sinning, and I can’t seem to conquer it, so does this mean I’m not truly a Christian?”

Frankly, this is the question John wanted his readers to wrestle with. Jesus Himself said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord, will enter the Kingdom of heaven.’” So who will enter the Kingdom of heaven? John’s answer is the same as Jesus’: “The one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” (Mt. 7:21)

How does this work? The key is right there in v. 9. See the “for” and “because”? The reason those who are born of God do not, and cannot, continue in sin is that God’s seed abides in them.

John uses a striking word here, the only time in the Bible this word is used of God. I’ll give you the Greek word, and you’ll know it right away—*sperma*. Six times in our passage John talks about being born of God and the children of God. This is very different from adoption, as beautiful as that picture is. This is divine procreation. This is God putting His seed, His sperm, in us and creating a new life within us. Where there is that new life, it will show itself—in doing the things God likes and in not doing the things He hates. If there is a complete indifference to sin, if you just keep on doing whatever you want, John says then you must not have God in you.

Like Father, like son. Titus’s example is of Grandpa’s “sharp nose.” In Song of Solomon 7:4, we read, “Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, which looks toward Damascus.” I prefer the way The Message says it: “Your profile turns all heads, commanding attention.”

What is the Seed? It is the Spirit of God. He is implanted in us through the Word of God when we hear it, believe it, and receive it. A new life grows within us, one with divine DNA. This will produce fruit after its kind.

That’s why, in v. 10, it’s pretty clear who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: You just look for the family resemblance. There’s no great mystery here, no secret knowledge. In fact, it’s all pretty obvious, just like Jesus said in Matthew 7:16, “You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?”

God’s plan of salvation is to eradicate sin and heal us from its cancer. In the OT, He told His people what to do—but they couldn’t do it. Many religions of the world today do the same thing. They show us the right path—but give no power to actually walk in it. God, in His Son, has done something radically different. The old covenant, with its rules and regulations, was faulty. Hebrews says, in 8:8, that it didn’t work to actually get rid of sin, and so God established a new covenant, a better covenant, with His people. He has washed us with pure water, put His Spirit within us, and now that His law is within our hearts, it’s something we want to do. And if it’s not the tenor of your heart, the list of your life, the desire of your soul, then you may not yet have been born of God, for there is no evidence of His life or character in you.

Questions

1. What do I do if I’m pretty sure I’m not born of God? If I don’t have any internal desire to do what is righteous, and I just keep on doing what I want to do without worrying about it? There’s good news—you can be born again today!
2. How many times of sinning equals “keeping on sinning”? When is it an isolated sin, like David with Bathsheba or Peter denying Christ, and when is it a habit? 490? The Bible gives no number. There is always forgiveness available to those who repent and

ask for forgiveness (1:9). But the question today is, where is your heart? Do you see evidence of His life within you, small as it may be? Do you, this morning, want to let the life of God become full in you by sweeping away the remaining dust bunnies of sin in your life. Or maybe mud clods. Or maybe stinking rotting rat carcasses that it's long past time you got out of the temple of God, your heart.

3. I sense that the Spirit is within me, starting to transform me, but it's very weak and slow. How can I let the life of Jesus grow stronger in me? That's a great question, though it's not answered in this passage. There are other parts of Scripture that talk about the need to put sin to death, to put off the old and put on the new, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. We do have a role to play in growing in righteousness. But it is not just by gritting our teeth and determining to do better. It's by doing the first two imperatives in this passage. In 3:1, we read, "Behold" the love of the Father. And in 2:28, "Abide in Him," which is the same verb as in 3:9 God's seed abides in us.

Conclusion

God's plan of salvation is not just to get you into heaven. It's to get the sin out of you. It's to heal you, to set you free, and to one day make you as pure and holy as Jesus Himself when you see Him face to face. He's provided for that by loving you enough to make you His child—by sending Jesus to cover the debt of your sin, and by putting His seed, the Holy Spirit, in you so that you can live a new life.

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