

1 John:

The Certainty of Eternal Life

TITLE

The first epistle of John is named for the author, the apostle John. He does not identify himself in the book, but two of John's disciples, Polycarp and Papias, quote from the book and attribute it to him.

BACKGROUND

John probably wrote 1, 2, and 3 John shortly after the writing of his Gospel Account. He wrote about the life of Jesus to produce (or strengthen) faith in Christ (Jn. 20:31). He wrote 1 John to help believers go on to perfection (or maturity), that their joy might be "complete" (1:4; 5:13).

In the Gospel of John, the key word is "believe"; in 1 John, the key word is "know." "Know" and its derivatives are found thirty to forty times in the book. The emphasis is on confident certainty.

John's constant use of the word "know" is a play on words. The Greek word for "know" is *gnosis*, and John is combating the Gnosticism of his day. Gnostics claimed special knowledge (see notes in the articles "John: Christ, the Son of God" and "Colossians: The All-Sufficiency of Christ").

There were several varieties of Gnostics, but all thought of matter as evil. This gave them a peculiar view of the incarnation. One group believed the real Christ merely controlled the man Jesus and left Him before the crucifixion. Another group said that the Christ had an illusionary body and merely appeared to suffer. In 1 John, as in the Gospel Account, the apostle emphasizes that Christ became flesh (4:2, 3; see 2 Jn. 7).

The view of matter as evil also gave these false teachers a peculiar view of sin. Some went to one extreme, trying to remove from their lives anything that gave physical pleasure (note Col. 2:21). Most, however, went to the opposite extreme, saying that the actions of the flesh did not affect the spirit. Thus John emphasized the importance of obeying God (2:4) and living a godly life (3:10).

This is an intense letter from an older Christian to his spiritual children. It is a book filled with love (the word is used over fifty times in five chapters), but it is also very direct. It may have been intended to circulate among the churches in Asia. The place of the writing was probably Ephesus; the time, about A.D. 90 (see notes in the article "John: Christ, the Son of

God"). Because John does not mention patience under persecution in this book, it was probably written in the period of peace just prior to the outbreak of persecution under Domitian in A.D. 94-95.

OUTLINE: THE CERTAINTY OF ETERNAL LIFE (5:13)

INTRODUCTION (1:1-4).

I. CERTAINTY THROUGH WALKING IN THE LIGHT (1:5—2:29).

A. God is light (note 1:5-7; 2:8-11).

B. Emphasis on:

1. Commandments (2:3-8).

2. Commendation (2:12-14).

II. CERTAINTY THROUGH ABIDING IN LOVE (3; 4).

A. Practical love (3:11ff.).

B. Perfect love (4:7ff.); God's love (4:8, 16).

III. CERTAINTY THROUGH THE EXERCISE OF FAITH (5:1-12).

CONCLUSION: The certainties of life (5:13-20).

LESSONS FROM 1 JOHN

As children of God, we are never to become complacent (1 Cor. 10:12), but we should be characterized by a quiet confidence—not in self, but in the grace of God. Paul said, "There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord . . . will award to me on that day" (2 Tim. 4:8).

We can have confidence in knowing that "if we walk in the light . . . the blood of Jesus . . . cleanses us from all sin" (1:7). "Walking in the light" does not mean living perfectly (otherwise, we would have no sins to be cleansed). Rather, it refers to a *lifestyle*, the result of a heart set on obeying the Lord.

If the conscience is tender, we will at times feel guilt, but God's desire is that, as a rule, we have confidence before Him (v. 21). If our desire is to please Him, it is important to remember "God [who is gracious and merciful] is greater than our heart" (3:20). God wants us to *enjoy* the trip to heaven!

When We Sin (1 John 1:5-2:3)

Christians sin (1:8, 10). What *is* sin? John tells us in 1 Jn. 2:16; 3:4; 5:17. Apparently some claimed they no longer sinned. Today some people have no sense of sin; they call sin a disease, anti-social behavior, mistakes, psychological problems, but not S-I-N. The question is not *whether* we will sin, but how we will *deal* with it (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). Satan wants us either to be *disinterested* ("What I did wasn't all that bad") or *discouraged* ("There's no need in my trying"). John deals with the disinterested (2:1) and the discouraged (1:4).

When we sin, we need to remember three things:

I. REMEMBER: THE BLOOD OF CHRIST CONTINUALLY CLEANSSES (1:7).

A. Most realize that we are cleansed from our sins by the blood of Christ (Heb. 9:22; 10:4, 10; Rev. 1:5) and that we contact the blood when we are baptized into Christ (Rom. 6:3-6). How wonderful it is to know our sins have been washed away (Acts 22:16)! Some do not realize, however, that we can *continue* to have this marvelous feeling of forgiveness as the blood of Christ continues to cleanse us: 1:7 uses *the present tense*, indicating *continuous action*!

B. There is a condition: "If we walk in the light" (v. 7). What does this mean?

1. "God is light" (1:5; see Ps. 27:1); we need to walk with God. *Jesus* is also light (Jn. 1:5-9; 8:12); we need to walk with *Jesus*. Light comes from *God's Word* (Ps. 119:105, 130). We need to walk according to the Bible (note Amos 3:3).
2. "Walk" refers to the way we *live*. The phrase we use today is "*lifestyle*." To walk in the light of God's Word is to do what God wants to the best of our ability (2 Tim. 2:15a; Heb. 11:6; Phil. 3:13, 14). We will not be perfect, but when we stumble, we need to get up and keep going. The blood will continually cleanse us!

II. REMEMBER: GOD IS FAITHFUL TO FORGIVE OUR SINS (1:9).

A. This has a different emphasis than the last promise. Some ask, "How can I *know* I'm forgiven?" God is *faithful* and *just*!

1. God is *faithful*; you can trust Him (1:7).
2. God is *just*; He is fair. When Jesus died for our sins, the justice of God was satisfied (that is what "propitiation" means; 2:2). God can, in all fairness, forgive our sins! (The Christian who worries about forgiveness doubts whether the death of Jesus was sufficient!)

B. There is a condition: "If we *confess* our sins" (v. 9). People try to hide, forget, excuse, and run away from their sins. John says we need to *confess* them (note Prov. 28:13).

1. The compound Greek word translated "confess" does not mean merely acknowledging we have sinned; it means "to say the same thing"—the same thing as *God*. We must look at sin as God does, realizing how terrible it is and doing

all we need to do to turn from that sin (Acts 8:22; Jas. 5:16).

2. John is not talking about glibly saying, "I'm sorry" and thinking that takes care of it. He means, first of all, striving to walk in the light and, second, being brokenhearted when we fail to do so!

III. REMEMBER: WE HAVE AN ADVOCATE WITH THE FATHER (2:1).

A. From John's emphasis on cleansing and forgiveness, some might infer that it is okay to sin because God will forgive. John refutes this in v. 1a. Here the present tense is not used in the Greek, but *the aorist*, which indicates a *one-time action*. John says, "I do not want you to commit even *one* sin!" On the other hand, he knows that even if we are walking in the light (continuous action), we will commit sin (one-time sin, not a sinful lifestyle). Here is his third encouragement: "We have an Advocate."

1. "Advocate" is from a Greek word that means "one called alongside" to help. It was used in the courts to refer to the defense attorney.
2. *Jesus* pleads on our behalf (see Rom. 8:34; Heb. 4:15, 16)!

B. Again there is a condition: "If we keep His commandments" (2:3).

1. How can we *know* our relationship with God is right? By doing the will of God (2:4, 5)—to the best of our ability.
2. Are our hearts centered on doing the will of God? The slave obeys because he *must*; the employee obeys because he *needs to*; the mature child of God obeys because he *wants to*.

CONCLUSION

What confidence these promises can give us! These promises are only for the child of God committed to living for God. Are you a *faithful* Christian? You need to be!

Seven Tests of Christian Genuineness

1. "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; . . ." (1:6).
2. "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1:8).
3. "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us" (1:10).
4. "The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; . . ." (2:4).
5. "The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked" (2:6).
6. "The one who says he is in the light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now" (2:9).
7. "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (4:20).