

The Books of 1, 2, and 3 John

Lesson 9: Assurance of Eternal Life -- 1 John 5:13-21

Near the end of his letter, John finally tells us why he wrote the whole thing. “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.” There it is. Not that you may hope so, not that you may cross your fingers and wait to find out at the end, but that you may know. John believes ordinary Christians can have real, settled assurance of eternal life, and he wants you to have it.

But notice carefully whom he is addressing and what he has spent five chapters saying. He writes to those who believe, and he has shown all along that real belief is a living, obedient faith, faith that walks in the light, keeps His commandments, and loves the brethren. The assurance John offers is not a presumption that says, I prayed a prayer once, so I am eternally secure no matter how I live. It is the confidence of those who are genuinely trusting and following Christ, and who can therefore know, by His grace and His promise, that they have life.

Out of that assurance flows boldness in prayer. John says we have confidence that when we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. Assurance and prayer go together: the child who knows he is loved asks freely. John even touches the tender, difficult matter of praying for a brother who sins, calling us to intercede for one another, while soberly acknowledging that sin can be deadly serious. Confidence before God is meant to make us pray, not least for each other.

And John ends with three great certainties, ringing like bells. We know that we are born of God and kept by Him. We know that we belong to God while the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and given us understanding, so that we know Him who is true. Then, almost abruptly, a final word: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” Hold fast to the true God you have come to know, and let nothing take His place.

Group Discussion: John says he writes so that believers may know they have eternal life. Why do you think so many sincere Christians struggle to feel any real assurance, and what is the difference between healthy assurance and presumption?

Personal Reflection: John ends by urging, “keep yourselves from idols.” What is most likely to quietly take the place of God in your life right now, and what would it look like to guard your heart against it?

Read 1 John 5:13-21

Study Questions

1. John says, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (v. 13). What does this teach about whether a Christian can have real assurance of salvation, and on what basis that assurance rests?
2. John wants believers to know they have eternal life. Do you live with settled assurance or with nagging doubt about your standing with God, and what does this passage suggest about where to look for confidence?
3. John says we have confidence that "if we ask anything according to his will he hears us" (vv. 14–15). What does this teach about the nature and conditions of confident prayer, and how is praying according to God's will different from simply getting whatever we want?
4. John calls us to pray for a brother who is caught in sin (v. 16). How seriously do you take the responsibility to intercede for fellow believers who are struggling, and who is one person you should be praying for in this way?
5. John distinguishes between sin that leads to death and sin that does not (vv. 16–17). What might John mean by this, and what does it teach about the seriousness of persistent, unrepentant sin versus the sins for which we confess and are cleansed?
6. John assures us that "everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning," for the One born of God protects him (v. 18). How does this assurance of God's keeping power coexist with the letter's repeated warnings to remain faithful, and what part do you play in being kept?
7. John writes with confidence, "we know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (v. 19). How does this stark contrast between God's people and the world help you understand the spiritual reality you live in each day?
8. John says the world lies in the power of the evil one, yet believers belong to God. Where are you tempted to feel at home in a world that is not your true home, and how does this verse call you to live differently?
9. John grounds real assurance in genuine, obedient faith and a faithful walk, climaxing in knowing Him who is true (vv. 18–20), and then warns, "keep yourselves from idols" (v. 21). Why is the assurance John offers different from the presumption of 'once saved, always saved,' and how do knowing the true God and guarding against idols belong together?
10. Look back across this passage, from assurance of life, to confident prayer, to knowing the true God and keeping from idols. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you, through this passage, into someone who lives in settled assurance and undivided devotion to the true God.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: John 10:27–30, Christ's sheep hear His voice, follow Him, and are held in His hand; Romans 8:14–16, the Spirit's witness that we are children of God; Hebrews 10:19–25, confidence to draw near and the call to hold fast and encourage one another;

Philippians 4:6-7, prayer and the peace of God; 1 Corinthians 10:12-13, take heed lest you fall, and God's faithfulness in temptation.