

How Can I Know?, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: Can a Christian Know He Is Saved?

1 John 5:13

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this opening lesson establishes the thesis of the entire study: a faithful Christian truly can know that he has eternal life. First John 5:13 is John's own statement of purpose, and it settles at the outset that assurance is the revealed will of God for His people, not spiritual arrogance. The lesson must steer carefully between two opposite errors that will recur throughout the study. On one side stands the teaching that no one can really know in this life, which breeds chronic, faithless anxiety. On the other stands the "once saved, always saved" presumption, which treats salvation as an unconditional guarantee no matter how a person lives. Scripture charts a better course: assurance rests on the objective promises of God, is received in an obedient faith that brings a person to repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ, and is preserved through ongoing faith and a life walking in the light.

At the same time, this lesson was never meant merely to settle a debate. John wrote so that frightened, sincere believers could finally exhale and rest. Many of the people in the room have carried a quiet uncertainty about their standing with God for years, mistaking that uncertainty for humility. The deeper aim of the lesson is the formation of a settled, grounded heart, one that has learned to anchor its confidence in the finished work of Christ and the sure word of God rather than in feelings or performance.

So aim at both targets. Send students home with a clearer understanding of what biblical assurance is and is not, and with a softer, steadier confidence that they are held by a faithful God. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9, where the two opposite errors are named directly and the true ground of assurance is laid out. Let that question carry the weight, and let the rest of the lesson lift the eyes of the weary toward the God who wants His children to know.

Question 1

Student Question:

John tells us plainly why he wrote this letter: "that you may know that you have eternal life" (v. 13). What does this stated purpose reveal about whether God intends His people to live in assurance or in uncertainty?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by letting the verse say what it actually says. John does not write so that his readers might wish, or hope against hope, or merely keep trying. He writes so that they may know. The Greek

verb here speaks of settled, present knowledge, not a nervous estimate. The whole letter, with all its searching tests, is aimed at producing confidence, not anxiety. That single observation reorders the way many believers read 1 John.

Notice that this purpose statement comes near the end of the letter, after John has laid out his tests of genuine faith. He is not afraid that assurance and self-examination will cancel each other out. He gives the tests precisely so that, having honestly faced them, the believer can rest. Help students see that God is not playing a cruel game in which the rules of salvation are deliberately kept hidden. He wants His children to know they are His.

Set this verse alongside the close of John's Gospel, where he says he wrote "so that you may believe" (John 20:31). The Gospel was written to bring people to faith; the letter was written to assure those who already believe. God has given us two great bodies of inspired writing aimed at exactly these two needs, coming to Christ and resting in Christ.

Finally, press the pastoral point. If God wanted us to know, then chronic, settled uncertainty is not a virtue to be protected but a problem to be healed. The sincere believer who lives in constant fear of being lost is not being more humble than his confident brother; he is, without meaning to, calling God's clear promises into question. Our aim across this study is to help such a person move from fear to grounded, honest assurance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The purpose of 1 John: assurance for those who already believe, not evangelism of those who do not
- Assurance as the revealed will of God for His people, not spiritual arrogance
- The difference between settled knowledge grounded in promise and an anxious guess grounded in feeling
- The relationship between John's Gospel (written that we may believe) and his letter (written that we may know)

Discussion Prompts

- Why do you think so many faithful Christians assume that doubt is more humble than assurance?
- What would change in a believer's daily life if he truly knew, and not merely hoped, that he had eternal life?
- How does it comfort you that God wrote an entire letter so that His people could be sure?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think honestly about your own walk with God. Do you tend to live with quiet confidence in your salvation, or with a low, ongoing anxiety about it? Name what your sense of security (or insecurity) has actually been resting on.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question, and the goal is honesty rather than information. Many believers have never named the thing their assurance secretly rests on. For some it is a past emotional experience; for others it is how good a week they have had; for others it is simply not thinking about it. All of these are unstable foundations, and naming them is the first step toward something better.

Help students see the two opposite errors that this study will keep naming. On one side is presumption, the careless confidence that has nothing to do with how a person actually lives. On the other side is faithless anxiety, the inability to believe God will keep His word. Most people in the room lean toward one ditch or the other, and it helps them to know which way they tend to fall.

Be gentle here. Some of the most devoted believers are the most anxious, precisely because they take sin and holiness seriously. Their fear is not faithlessness in the ordinary sense; it is a misplaced earnestness that has never learned to rest. Reassure them that the rest of this study is for them.

Move the conversation toward the constructive half of the question. The point is not to wallow in insecurity but to begin relocating assurance onto its true foundation: the promises of God, received in obedient faith, and confirmed by a life walking in the light. Invite students to name the shaky foundation now so they can trade it for a solid one as the study unfolds.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The instability of basing assurance on feelings, performance, or a single past experience
- The two opposite dangers: careless presumption and faithless anxiety
- Honest self-knowledge as the doorway to genuine assurance
- The proper foundation of assurance: God's promises received in obedient faith

Discussion Prompts

- When your assurance wavers, what is usually happening in your life or your feelings at that moment?
- Which ditch are you more likely to fall into, presumption or anxiety, and why?
- What would it look like to move your confidence off of your performance and onto God's promise?

Question 3

Student Question:

John addresses his letter to those “who believe in the name of the Son of God” (v. 13). In light of the rest of John’s teaching, what kind of believing does he have in mind here, and how is it different from mere mental agreement?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John writes to those who “believe in the name of the Son of God.” In Scripture, to believe in the name of someone is to trust and submit to the whole person, His authority, His character, and His claims. This is not the bare acknowledgment that Jesus existed or even that He is divine. James reminds us that the demons believe that much and shudder (James 2:19).

The believing John has in mind is the kind that obeys. Throughout this letter he will insist that those who truly know Christ keep His commandments (1 John 2:3–4), and that faith and obedience cannot finally be separated. Saving faith is a trusting, surrendering, obeying faith, the faith that leads a person to repent, confess Christ, and be baptized into Him, and then to keep walking with Him.

This guards the lesson against the error of salvation by mental assent alone, sometimes called salvation by “faith only.” The New Testament never presents a faith that saves while leaving the life untouched. The same John who wrote this letter recorded Jesus saying, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Belief and obedience are two sides of one living trust.

At the same time, do not let the lesson tip into salvation by works or flawless performance. John is not saying we are saved by the quality of our obedience. He is saying that real faith shows itself, that a living trust in Christ inevitably begins to reshape a life. Assurance, then, is for those whose faith is genuine enough to be moving them toward obedience, however imperfectly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Believing “in the name” as trust in and submission to the whole person of Christ
- The difference between saving faith and mere intellectual assent (James 2:19)
- Faith and obedience as inseparable aspects of one living trust (John 14:15)
- The biblical response to the gospel: faith, repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 10:9–10)
- Rejecting both salvation by “faith only” and salvation by flawless human performance

Discussion Prompts

- How would you explain the difference between believing that Jesus is Lord and believing in Him?
- Why can faith and obedience never finally be separated in the Christian life?
- How does this fuller picture of faith protect us from both presumption and despair?

Question 4

Student Question:

Where does doubt about your standing with God tend to creep in most often? Name a specific situation, season, or recurring thought that most easily shakes your confidence before Him.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites students to locate the precise place where assurance leaks away. For one person it is after a particular sin; for another it is during a stretch of spiritual dryness when prayer feels empty; for another it is simply lying awake at night. Naming the exact trigger drains some of its power.

Help students notice that doubt almost always rises from looking in the wrong direction. When we measure our standing by our most recent failure or our current feelings, the ground will always be shaking. When we measure it by the finished work of Christ and the promises of God, the ground steadies.

Distinguish gently between conviction and condemnation. The Spirit convicts us of specific sin so that we will confess it and turn, and that conviction leads to cleansing and peace (1 John 1:9). The accuser, by contrast, whispers a vague, hopeless condemnation that drives us away from God rather than toward Him. Learning to tell these two voices apart is a lifelong and freeing skill.

End constructively. Ask students what it would look like to respond to their particular trigger not by spiraling but by returning to a concrete promise of God. The habit we are trying to build is the habit of answering doubt with truth, out loud if necessary.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between the Spirit's conviction of specific sin and the accuser's vague condemnation
- How doubt arises from looking at self and circumstances rather than at Christ and His promises
- Confession and cleansing as God's appointed answer to a troubled conscience (1 John 1:9)
- Answering feeling with truth as a learned spiritual discipline

Discussion Prompts

- What is the most common trigger for doubt in your own walk?
- How can you tell the difference between healthy conviction and unhealthy condemnation?
- What specific promise of God could you return to the next time that doubt comes?

Question 5

Student Question:

John says that those who believe “have eternal life,” speaking of it as a present possession. What does it mean that eternal life is something the believer already has now, and not only a reward waiting in the future?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John deliberately uses the present tense: believers “have” eternal life. Eternal life is not merely a quantity of time that begins after death; it is a quality of life, a real and present relationship with God through Christ that begins the moment a person is born into His family. Jesus defined it this way in John 17:3, that they may know the Father and the Son.

This present possession does not cancel the future hope; it secures it. The believer already shares in the life of God now, and that life will be brought to fullness in the resurrection and the world to come. Assurance, then, is not only about the future verdict but about a present reality the believer can actually begin to experience.

Tie this to the new birth and entrance into Christ. In baptism the penitent believer is united with Christ’s death and raised to “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3–4). The eternal life John speaks of is the life of that new creation, already begun, already real, already ours to live in.

Press the comfort of it. If eternal life is a present possession grounded in our union with the living Christ, then our assurance does not have to wait, trembling, for some far-off accounting. We can know now, because the life we have now is His life in us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Eternal life as a present possession and a present relationship, not merely future duration (John 17:3)
- The continuity between life in Christ now and resurrection life to come
- The new birth and newness of life received in union with Christ (Romans 6:3–4)
- Assurance grounded in a present reality, not only a future verdict

Discussion Prompts

- How does it change things to think of eternal life as a quality of relationship you already have, not just a future destination?
- In what ways have you tasted the life of God already, here and now?
- Why is it good news that assurance rests on a present reality and not only on a future judgment?

Question 6

Student Question:

If eternal life is something you can possess now, are you actually living in it, or merely waiting for it? What is one way your daily life would look different this week if you truly lived as someone who already has the life of God in you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question turns the previous truth into a mirror. Many believers functionally treat eternal life as a deferred prize, something they are working toward and hoping to receive at the end. As a result they live anxious, joyless, striving lives, missing the very life that is already theirs.

Help students imagine the concrete difference. A person who knows he already possesses the life of God prays differently, faces fear differently, handles failure differently, and treats other people differently. Assurance is not a luxury; it changes the texture of an ordinary day.

Watch for the subtle works-righteousness that hides here. Some students live as though they must earn each day what God has already given. Gently redirect them to rest in what is theirs in Christ, and then to live out of that security rather than to earn it.

Land the question on something specific. Press for one tangible change this week, a fear surrendered, a sin confessed and released, a relationship approached with the confidence of a beloved child rather than the fear of an orphan.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Living from assurance rather than for assurance
- How a sense of present eternal life reshapes prayer, fear, failure, and relationships
- The danger of functional works-righteousness that tries to earn what God has already given
- Identity as a beloved child of God as the ground of daily Christian living

Discussion Prompts

- In what ways have you been living as though eternal life is only a future prize?
- How would a settled confidence in God's love change one specific relationship or fear this week?
- What is the difference between living from God's acceptance and living for it?

Question 7

Student Question:

Across this letter John points to evidence that accompanies genuine faith, such as obedience to God's commands and love for fellow believers. Why does John give us such tests, and how do they actually strengthen rather than threaten true assurance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Preview the structure of the whole letter here. John repeatedly offers tests of genuine faith: do we keep His commands, do we love the brethren, do we hold the truth about Christ, do we walk in the light? These are not hurdles designed to disqualify the sincere; they are evidences designed to reassure them.

Explain how the tests function. To the careless presumer, who claims Christ but lives in darkness, the tests are a sober warning. To the humble, struggling believer, who walks toward the light however imperfectly, the same tests become a quiet confirmation: the very fact that he loves God's people and grieves over his sin is evidence that the life of God is in him.

Make clear that the tests do not replace the promise; they confirm it. Our assurance rests first and foremost on the objective promises of God in Christ. The evidence of a changed life does not earn those promises; it shows that we have truly received them. Both the promise and the evidence stand together.

Anticipate the anxious student's objection. He will say, "But my obedience and love are so imperfect." Reassure him: John is pointing to direction, not perfection. The question is not whether you have arrived but whether the life of God has genuinely begun to move you toward the light. A faint pulse is still a pulse.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The tests of 1 John as evidence that confirms genuine faith, not hurdles that earn salvation
- How the same test warns the presumptuous and reassures the humble
- The promise of God and the evidence of a changed life held together
- Assurance grounded in the direction of a life, not the perfection of it

Discussion Prompts

- Why would a loving apostle give struggling believers tests to examine themselves by?
- How can evidence of grace in your life strengthen your confidence without becoming a new form of works-righteousness?
- What is the difference between a life moving toward the light and a life that has arrived at perfection?

Question 8

Student Question:

When your feelings tell you one thing about your standing with God and His promises tell you another, which do you tend to believe? Describe a recent time the two were in conflict, and how you responded.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Feelings are real, but they are unreliable witnesses to our standing with God. They rise and fall with sleep, health, circumstances, and temperament. A believer can be perfectly secure in Christ and feel nothing, or feel wonderful and be in real spiritual danger. The goal is not to manufacture feelings but to anchor assurance in something steadier.

Help students see the proper order. We do not move from feeling to fact; we move from fact to faith, and feeling often follows in time. When the heart accuses, the believer learns to preach truth to himself: God has promised, Christ has died and risen, I have come to Him in faith and obedience, therefore I am His, whatever my feelings say tonight.

Offer the example of the Psalms, where the writers often speak to their own downcast souls: “Why are you cast down, O my soul? Hope in God” (Psalm 42:5). This is not denial of feeling; it is refusing to let feeling have the last word over revealed truth.

Close by inviting a concrete practice. Encourage students to identify two or three promises of God they can return to when feelings turn against them, and to speak those promises deliberately, even out loud, until the storm of feeling passes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unreliability of feelings as a witness to our standing with God
- Moving from fact to faith to feeling, rather than letting feeling rule
- Preaching truth to oneself as a biblical pattern (Psalm 42:5)
- The objective promises of God as the steady anchor of the soul

Discussion Prompts

- How much authority do your feelings currently have over your sense of God's acceptance?
- What does it look like, practically, to preach the truth to yourself when your heart accuses you?
- Which promises of God would you most want to have ready for those moments?

Question 9

Student Question:

Some teach that a person can never truly know he is saved, while others teach that once a person is saved he is eternally secure no matter how he lives. How does Scripture chart a different course, and on what does a faithful Christian's real assurance actually rest?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson, and it deserves the fullest treatment. Two opposite errors must be named clearly. The first says no one can really know in this life, so the honest believer must live in perpetual uncertainty. John flatly contradicts this in verse 13: he wrote so that we may know. Assurance is possible, and it is God's will for His people.

The second error runs the other way. It says that once a person is saved he is eternally secure regardless of how he afterward lives, often summarized as “once saved, always saved.” But Scripture warns genuine believers, not pretenders, that they can fall away. Paul tells the Galatians that those who seek to be justified by law have “fallen away from grace” (Galatians 5:4), and Hebrews warns believers against “an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12). A salvation that cannot be forfeited would make such warnings meaningless.

So Scripture charts a third and better course. The faithful Christian truly can know he is saved, yet that assurance is not unconditional in the sense of being independent of ongoing faith. Assurance rests, first, on the objective promises of God, that He forgives the penitent, that the blood of Christ cleanses, that He keeps those who keep trusting Him. It is received in an obedient faith, the faith that brings a person to repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4). And it is confirmed by the ongoing evidence of a life walking in the light.

Hold the two truths together, because the gospel holds them together. The believer is genuinely secure, kept by the power of God, and may rest in full assurance; and the believer is genuinely free, called to remain faithful, capable of wandering and therefore lovingly warned. This is not double-mindedness. It is the difference between a child who knows he is loved and secure in his father’s house, and a child who imagines he could set the house on fire and suffer no consequence. Assurance is the confident rest of the faithful, not a guarantee handed to the careless.

Bring it home pastorally. The point of all this is not to unsettle the faithful but to ground them. The Christian who is walking with God, however imperfectly, has every right to a deep and settled assurance. He need not live in fear. And the Christian who has grown careless is being lovingly told that the door home is still open, but that he must not presume. Both are held within the same promises of the same faithful God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Against the error that no one can know he is saved in this life (1 John 5:13)
- Against the error of “once saved, always saved” (Galatians 5:4; Hebrews 3:12–14; 6:4–6; 2 Peter 2:20–22)
- Assurance grounded in the objective promises of God, not in human merit or in a feeling
- Salvation received in obedient faith: belief, repentance, confession, and baptism into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4)
- Salvation preserved through ongoing faith and obedience, not by an unconditional guarantee
- The settled rest of the faithful believer distinguished from the false security of the careless

Discussion Prompts

- How does verse 13 answer the claim that a Christian can never really know he is saved?
- Why do the New Testament's warnings against falling away only make sense if a saved person can in fact fall?
- How can a believer hold genuine assurance and genuine watchfulness at the same time without contradiction?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this opening lesson on assurance. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses, and the single truth from 1 John 5:13 that you most need to carry into the coming week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the whole lesson and turns it toward formation. The aim is not another piece of information but a personal response. Give students quiet space to answer honestly rather than rushing to fill the silence.

Listen for where each person is on the road. Some need permission to finally rest in assurance and stop punishing themselves. Others need a gentle, honest call to stop presuming and start walking. The same passage speaks to both, and a good teacher helps each person hear the word meant for him.

Encourage students to name something concrete and carry-able: a single sentence from verse 13, a specific promise, a particular fear they will hand to God this week. Assurance grows as it is practiced, not merely understood.

Close the session by pointing forward. This lesson has set the foundation; the lessons that follow will walk through John's tests one by one. Reassure the class that those tests are not meant to erode the assurance we have begun to build but to deepen and confirm it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation as the goal of doctrinal study, not merely information
- The same truth ministering differently to the presumptuous and the anxious
- Assurance as something practiced and grown into, not only understood
- The foundation of assurance laid for the tests that follow in 1 John

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one truth from this lesson you most need to carry with you this week?
- Where is Jesus inviting you to trade fear for grounded confidence, or presumption for honest watchfulness?
- How could you build a habit this week of returning to God's promise when doubt comes?