

1 John 5

Around the world there are some iconic mountains like Mount Fuji in Japan which photographers can spend their whole life going round and taking a new shot of from a different angle, at different times of day and in different weather. It's the same mountain but an amazing array of views of it.

John's first letter is a bit like that. His mountain are his key themes of faith, love and obedience and he looks at the interaction of them, sometimes 2 of them sometimes all 3. Hence, a lot of it we can feel is familiar. He may have already given us a view of it, but it's from a slightly different angle. But his point is they are all part of the one mountain which is living the Christian life.

Our chapter starts with the beginnings of the Christian life, '**Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God**'. This is the start of the Christian life, to be born of God. We are all born of the flesh or of the world from our mother's womb, but we are not yet born of God. We are born of God when we accept the revelation of himself he has given us in his Son and 'believe'. '**Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God**'.

It is John who gives us this famous picture of the start of the Christian life in his Gospel '**you must be born again**'. It is such a tragedy that this wonderful picture of the start of the Christian life has become so tarnished by unfortunate tie-ins with what a '**born again Christian**' is. Every Christian is a '**born again Christian**'. As John tells us here we have believed and thus by a wondrous act of grace the life of Christ has been born in us.

And the 2nd half of verse 1, we are in the familiar John territory. '**Faith, love and obedience**'. Those who have been born again by the wondrous grace of a heavenly Father cannot but love others who have also been born again. The love of God cannot be a selfish thing for me, it is generously poured on us to be shared.

Verses 2 and 3 reiterate this, it's another mini-mountain we are walking round and surveying: we love the children of God, by loving God and obeying him, just as in verse 3 John tells us that we love God by obeying his commands, top of which is '**to love one another**'.

Love for God or for other people in his family is not just an emotional bond; it is one which results in practical action.

Now a word about what is ahead in chapter 5 and there are some surprises. When you're at vicar school and are given tuition in how to do sermons you are often told something like this. When you preach a sermon do 3 things:

- 1) you tell them what you're going to tell them
- 2) then you tell them
- 3) then you tell them what you've told them.

Beginning, middle and end.

Now when you get to the end you're summing up, reminding them of your key points. It seems clear at times that John didn't go to 'Vicar School' because he does in 1 John 5 what you're told definitely not to do in your endings and that is to introduce new material which you haven't mentioned before. In our study of 1 John 5 we've got to be ready for these '**bolts from the blue**'.

John's first unexpected bolt is in the 2nd half of verse 3 through to verse 5, where he turns to explain that those who are born of God will '**overcome the world**'. 3 times this phrase is repeated.

The world brings pressures for the child of God, moral pressures, intellectual or even physical pressures. The world is often used by John in more than one sense. It is the object of God's love, but also it is the place of opposition to God and his ways.

John tells us here, being a child of God, knowing Jesus the Son of God and what he accomplished will give us the ultimate victory. In the world we will have these things, but they are not stronger than us as people '**born of God**' and hence also '**children of God**'.

Verses 6-8 brings us another of John's new thoughts that we haven't heard before: '**This is the one that came by water and blood – Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and blood; and the three are in agreement**'.

Jesus came by water and blood. What does this mean? This has been described as a most perplexing part of the letter and inevitably over 2000 years different theories have been put forward.

This rather surprising way of summing up the life of Jesus may have been John speaking into particular issues and even heresies of his day. Here, what Jesus was when he came among us, is probably referring to. 'Water' is his baptism, passing through water and his death the blood, the beginning and end of his life. Jesus was the Christ from beginning to last.

Then John introduces a 3rd element '**Spirit**', '**water, blood and Spirit**'. The Holy Spirit, poured out at Jesus' baptism and who filled his whole life, and led him to the cross, now bears witness to him and what he accomplished in the life of the believer. Jesus tells us that Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth and will take from Jesus and make it known to us. His purpose is to glorify Jesus and so he will do that by making him known to us from beginning to end now.

(Pause there. My daughter was very impressed to see the phrase '**bear with**' recently in a Bible reading in church. Apparently, this is a '**cool phrase**' to say to someone these days when you want them to show patience. We need to do a bit of '**bearing with**' John at this part of the letter as he has more fresh thoughts to bring us).

⁹We accept human testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son.¹⁰ Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. ¹¹And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

This is another of John's mini-mountains around which we take all sorts of views and here it is around the testimony of God, what God has revealed to us by his Spirit, whom John has just reminded us of.

It is pretty forthright language. We need to remember that John is writing to new Christian churches probably around Ephesus in what is now Turkey. It is important that these new churches do not depart into theological error as they, as new churches, are prone to do. He is telling them the truth straight to guard and protect them. In today's world with huge amounts of what is called 'religious illiteracy' and where God is often left out of life or talked about in much more measured language, we have quite a challenge to communicate hard truths. We can easily make a negative impact or avoid hard truths and become anaemic and weak.

A good way in here can be to see or draw attention to John's key point: that God has spoken to us in his Son – given '**testimony**' to the world. The testimony, verse 11, is that God has given us eternal life in Jesus Christ. If we have Jesus we have life, life as it was made to be lived, life eternal and if we don't have Jesus Christ we are missing out on life.

Who was Jesus? Why did he come? These are questions we want to be asked and debated.

In the world around us, many balloons of cosy assumptions about human progress, and its inevitability, are popping. Foolishly over-optimistic views about humanity and its perfectibility are harder and harder to justify. Christian faith says as John does here, God has spoken to us in his Son, which is far greater '**testimony**' (or wisdom) than '**human testimony**'. Human beings often seem to like to think they know better than God and fail to believe. Yet we do so at our peril, says John.

Concluding affirmations. John is drawing to a close.

¹³I 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. ¹⁴This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him.

John's Gospel was written for unbelievers, John's letter was written for believers. We can easily forget that, when we read them. John explains here why he is writing to believers and it is to head them have assurance in their faith, confidence that they have eternal life and to be living it out now.

John wants us to '**know that we have eternal life**'. That bedrock of what Christ has accomplished for us should be the sure foundation, the bedrock of our faith. Rightly understood, it is not arrogant to have this faith. We are never saying that it is something we have deserved, merited, earned or anything like that. We could never achieve that.

Christian assurance is all about knowing that we are a humble receiver of the grace of God poured out in Jesus Christ. We are not better than anyone who does not have this hope. We should long, work and pray that others will believe in the Lord Jesus and receive it too.

¹⁴This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

In chapter 2 verse 28, John says he wants us to be confident on the day when Christ appears. Now, in verse 14, John also wants the believer to have the confidence to approach God in prayer, knowing that we are heard and seeking his will as we ask him. A commentary on this verse memorably says that **'every true prayer is a variation on the theme 'your will be done'.**' We can't just ask him for every daft thing that comes into our head, but a true prayer is unfailingly heard on by a Father who is near not far away.

¹⁵And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him.

We are going round another of John's mini-mountains again, about prayer. This is a rather starting claim, but very similar to the teaching of Jesus in John's gospel: John 15.7: **'if you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you will and you will receive it'.**

Our Christian experience can lead us to struggle with this teaching, it doesn't always seem to happen.

There are reasons for this which we need to remember. So often our prayers are for the wrong things, for personal ease or we are trying to browbeat God by force of prayer to come round to our way of thinking. Prayer for someone may be more about lifting someone into the sure embrace of God, rather than telling him this is what he must do for them.

The other thing that often seems to be at work in Jesus' teaching which this echoes, is what we might call an over-the-top statement is made 'camel through the eye of a needle, pluck your eye out' in order to startle us and shake up our thinking.

We can easily pray with almost an unspoken air or expectation of adding another item to the vast pending tray of God, who is doing his best to wade through 5 billion requests a day or whatever he gets. As another commentator says: **'God has no pending tray!'** When we pray it is answered, he wants us to have that trust in him. Our prayer is valued and will be answered.

¹⁶If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that. ¹⁷All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.

These verses are even more perplexing than verse 5, which at least we can probably work out what is being referred to! We inevitably wonder **'what is this sin that unlike others leads to death?'**

Well, we can at least see an important basic lesson in the Christian life here. We are called to pray and work for the well-being of others. Our faith is not about just giving me a cosy assurance, or even a safe eternal life. As John and the Bible tell us faith leads us out, to want for others all that we have received from God. What God has to give them is summed up wonderfully in the word **'life'**. Terry quoted Jesus' famous saying 2 weeks ago, **'I have come that you may have life'**. Life is a wonderful one-word-summary for all that God gives us in Christ: life eternal and life in the meantime now.

There are various possibilities for what this **'sin that leads to death'** is: a particularly serious type of sin, although this seems OT rather than NT. It could be apostasy, a denial of Christ and a renouncing of faith, it could be the mysterious sin against the Holy Spirit referred to in the Gospels, or it could be false teachers, those preaching a distortion of the Gospel message.

We should not get too worried that there are somethings in a letter that, 2000 years on, we will not understand. Almost certainly, for most of us it is better to concentrate on the challenge of the letter that we do understand than get worked up, discouraged or distracted by that which is unlikely to have the most relevance to us. Unlike in the Gospels, John also does not appear to be talking about anything unpardonable, it just not yet pardoned.

¹⁸ We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them.

John is now rounding off his message and he challenges us here, as he has done, in chapters 2 & 3 with the incompatibility of being a child of God and continuing to sin. It is not saying that we will never sin again, that would be impossible for us. But John is challenging us to live out who we are: children of God, born of God – live it out!

Another important insight here is that this is not chiefly our work or depending on us to keep trying harder. Keeping us free from sin is the continuing work of Jesus Christ in us **'the one who is born of God keeps them safe'**. Not sinning and being kept from the evil one he at work to do in us. That can give us hope, faced with such a daunting challenge.

Perhaps you know the 18th century hymn writer with the amazing name of Augustus Montague Toplady. His most famous hymn is Rock of Ages, but another has this verse:

**A Sov'reign Protector I have,
Unseen, yet forever at hand,
Unchangeably faithful to save,
Almighty to rule and command.
He smiles, and my comforts abound;
His grace as the dew shall descend;
And walls of salvation surround
The soul He delights to defend.**

¹⁹ We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. ²⁰ We know also 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 by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

Here is John summing up. He reminds his hearers of their status as **'children of God'**. A reminder: that he saying this is God's gift to us in Jesus Christ, to be born of God, him living in us, when we believe in what he has done in Jesus Christ.

We live in a world that rebels against God and follow the devils path, believing and living as if human beings are god and that we have no need of any other god than ourselves.

Christians know that Jesus Christ has come. He is the turning point, the pivot in history. He is truth. He gives us understanding to the true realities in life. Living in him, with him born in us is **'truth'**, and it is life and wonderfully gives us eternal life.

²¹ Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

John's final sentence, in one sense a summary of much of what has gone before, but in another sense, he may be breaking the Vicar School rules by introducing a startling new thought in his final sentence.

'Dear children'. It is very easy to rush past phrases like this in the Bible. Yet we do so at our peril. 'Dear children'. You are a dear child and child of God. You are a child for whom Christ came and gave his life for. John is trying to show the tender love that God in Christ has for his people. When you believe, to know that you are a dear child of God is the new identity given to you, for you to live in always. **'I am a dearly loved child of God'**. Spend time with that image. Write it down. Stop and look at it regularly.

John ends with this startling challenge: **'keep yourselves from idols.'**

Don't put pale imitations in the place of God. The world is full of potential idols: money, sex, fame, possessions, family, work..... All sorts of things that are good and God-given can turn into idols when they take over our lives and become God substitutes. John has not mentioned idols specifically before, but it's a striking climax with which to end this letter.

What are my idols? This is a very worthwhile question to regularly ask ourselves as it is unlikely that we won't have a few that we turn to bow down to daily, maybe hourly. What is so wonderful about them that they can take God's place and my identity in God?

QUESTIONS:

- 1) What is the biggest challenge from this chapter and this book for us individually? What can we do about it?
- 2) What is the biggest challenge for the church from this chapter and the whole of 1 John? What can we do about it?
- 3) How can we find help with the 'idols' around us?
- 4) Is there something that you are finding hard to take in from 1 John?
- 5) Is there any follow up you should do individually, or we should do as a church, following on from this course?