

What Do You Know About Salvation? An Introduction to 1 John, Part 2

I love Texas. I wasn't born here, but as is often said, "I got here as fast as I could." I like the climate, I like the people, I like the pace of life and the cultural setting. And I particularly love this church, which God has placed in this location for this time.

But there is a problem in Texas that is unique for believers in Christ. There are too many people who are too comfortable about salvation and their salvation in particular. Perhaps I should have kept count, but I didn't, of the number of times people have said to me when I've shared the gospel with them, "Oh, I've done that — I did that when I was 8-years-old..." It's as if they received the most painful childhood inoculation and they never want to "do that" again. Christianity is something that is too often perceived as a one-time event that should never be repeated. We go through the event and never return to the person.

You've come across those kinds of responses as well. These are people who want the security of not going to hell, but they really don't want anything to do with Christ either. In fact, some have said that it is possible to be an unbelieving believer — to be saved by God, though you reject Christ:

"It is possible, even probable that when a believer out of fellowship falls for certain types of philosophy, if he is a logical thinker, he will become an 'unbelieving believer.' Yet believers who become agnostics are still saved; they are still born again. You can even become an atheist; but if you once accept Christ as saviour, you cannot lose your salvation, even though you deny God." [R. B. Thieme, quoted by MacArthur, Gospel According to Jesus, 108.]

Could that possibly be true? Can one be an open atheist yet also saved? Is he spared from the wrath of God though he openly hates God?

This is no small question. We sometimes overstate things in order to make them seem important — "this is *the* critical moment of the game..." or "that's the best \$100 you'll ever spend," or "that's the kindest thing you've ever said..." or "that's the best dessert I've ever had." None of those is probably literally true. So while I want to be careful about not overstating it, answering the question, "can you be spared from the wrath of God while being a God-hater?" is an *infinitely* important question. One's eternal position will be determined by what he believes about that question.

And it's a question that John addresses directly in his first letter.

False teachers had infiltrated a number of churches in Asia Minor so that some who should have been sure about their salvation were uncertain and those who should have been uncertain about their salvation weren't. So John was writing those churches to offer a definitive answer to the heretics and assure the believers of their salvation and make the unbelievers uncertain.

In every way, John wants the believer to know and be sure of his salvation.

So last week we said that —

FIRST JOHN IS WRITTEN TO ASSURE READERS OF THEIR SALVATION THROUGH TESTS OF THEIR DOCTRINE AND MORALITY — WHAT THEY BELIEVE AND WHAT THEY DO (5:13).

And we talked about the background of 1 John — who were the people that John was addressing, and what were the main themes in the book? What did John say about God, Christ, man, and salvation? And it seemed to me in preparing that message, that it would be most helpful as we enter this book to spend one Sunday just talking about salvation — what does John teach about salvation?

THE BELIEVER IN CHRIST IS NOT KEPT BY HIS WORKS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, BUT HIS RIGHTEOUS WORKS DEMONSTRATE (AND GIVE ASSURANCE) THAT HE IS KEPT BY CHRIST.
RIGHT BELIEVING WILL PRODUCE RIGHT LIVING AND
RESULT IN A RIGHT CONFIDENCE IN CHRIST'S SALVATION.

As we consider this topic, I want to briefly consider what John says about salvation and belief in his gospel, and then consider what he teaches in this epistle and then make two brief applications.

- 1. Salvation in John's Gospel**
- 2. Salvation in John's Epistle**
- 3. Summary**
- 4. Application**

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1. Salvation in John's Gospel

- I want to start this discussion in John's gospel for two reasons:
 - ✓ Because it is parallel in thought to 1 John but not identical in structure to 1 John. As one writer has said, John wrote the gospel to *arouse* faith and he wrote the epistle to *establish* faith's certainty.
 - ✓ Secondly, in the Gospel we have many of Christ's own words about salvation. It's good to listen to what Jesus has to say about saving faith.
- "Believe" in John. We could say much about salvation in John (I have preached over 100 sermons from that book). But I want to focus on one word that John uses repeatedly in the Gospel.
 - ✓ The verb "believe" ("trust") appears 98x in the Gospel (the noun is never used). [The same verb is used 9x in the Epistle and the noun is used once.] E.g., 1:7, 12. The verb is used in three primary ways:
 - To refer to a definitive act of faith and belief in Christ (aorist tense – 33x) — there was a decisive time when faith began (e.g., 2:11, 22-23; 4:39).
 - A few times (6x) it has a form that means, "believed and are continuing to believe" — e.g., 6:69; 8:31; 11:27. In 20:29 both of these forms are used to indicate they are parallel; there is ongoing faith after the inception of faith.
 - To refer to the ongoing nature of belief (more than 50% of the uses) — faith is progressive and ongoing, continual (9:35, 38; 12:44, 46; 15:5 ["abide"]); 20:31).
 - ✓ Summary — To believe means more than just agreeing to a set of facts about Jesus Christ. It means to be committed to Him in such a way that we are submissive to Him (this is the message of the entire book).

“Jesus’ demands are for a lifetime. He does not demand a single decision to repent or come or believe or love or listen. All these continue. The transformation of repentance continues. Coming to Jesus again and again continues. Believing in him hour by hour continues. Listening to his word as the daily source of spiritual life continues. Jesus demands the engagement of our minds and hearts every day of our lives. A transaction with Jesus in the past that has not ongoing expression in our lives was a false transaction. When Jesus said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples” (John 8:31), he meant that if we don’t abide, we are not truly his disciples.” [Piper, What Jesus Demands from the World, 62.]

✓ Explanation of Jn. 3:15-16 —

- And He came to earth for this purpose (**must**, v. 14) — to be lifted up like the serpent — later they understood this reference to cross.
- In Numbers the people needed to believe two things: 1) they were dying; 2) the snake was God’s provision of life. We must believe the same: we are dead & dying and Christ is life.
- He came **so that** everyone who believes in Him will have eternal life.
 - ... **Eternal life** refers to length of time (beginning now, not just after we die).
 - ... But it also refers to quality and substance of life with Christ (17:3; 1 Jn. 5:12; Col. 3:3).
 - ... That life is with Him, through Him, and culminates in joy and delight in Him. He is the great object of our pleasure. Eternal life is not just about no punishment; it is about “getting God.”
- The way to have this eternal life (quality of life now and quality and quantity of life later) is to **believe** in Him (vv. 15, 16 are virtually identical phrases, slightly different prepositions).
 - ... Every man needs to believe.
 - ... Any man can believe.
 - ... There is no life without belief. The verse actually reads: “all the ones who believe...” That is, there is a provision of life *only* to those who believe. Anyone can believe, but only the ones who believe as an ongoing pattern receive the provision of life.

“John constantly lets us see the challenge posed by the message of Jesus. Men divide in the presence of this message. Either they commit themselves to Christ in faith and so enter life or they refuse to commit themselves and remain in darkness and a condition of lostness.” [Morris, John, p. 40.]

- SUMMARY — In the Gospel of John salvation is given to those who believe — and continue to believe — in Christ for their salvation. (Which means that John has no category for those who are unbelieving believers.)

2. Salvation in John's Epistle

- *What John says about eternal life:*
 - ✓ This book is about eternal life. In fact, the book begins and ends talking about eternal life (**1:1-2; 5:20**), so this theme serves as a set of brackets for the entire book. From start to finish John is talking about eternal life.
 - ✓ And this eternal life has been granted through Christ's salvation (e.g., 2:17, 25; 3:14, 15-16; 4:9; 5:11-13, 16).
 - ✓ This life is *eternal*, which means two things:
 - The believer needs to be looking towards eternity because this life is rooted in the One who is Himself life and eternal. We don't live for the here and now as much as what will come. We aren't as concerned about suffering now because we know we have surpassing treasure and reward later (**3:1-3**).
 - When does the believer possess eternal life? Is it something he will receive later, or is it something he possesses now? He possesses it now (**5:11, 13**; 3:14). They already have it. So with the emphasis on *eternal* life, John is affirming to the readers that what they have is sure and certain. We are (and our salvation is), as Peter says, "protected by the power of God" (1 Pt. 1:5). Once this salvation and eternal life has been granted, it cannot cease to exist. We can rest in it and be confident in it because of the One who keeps us in it (4:17).
- *What John says about Christ's work.* What John says about Christ's work will tell us much so that we can define and understand salvation accurately.
 - ✓ The blood of Christ is what cleanses men from sin — 1:7, 9. Verse 9 makes clear that He is not merely removing sin's debt, but also removing its power to restore fellowship with God & man. Some of the heretics said that they could sin and it didn't matter to God (1:6). It does.
 - ✓ He appeared to take away sin — 3:5. His work was not only to remove God's wrath from our sin but to take the sin away. He removes sin along with removing the penalty of sin. (So it becomes possible to do righteous acts which we could not do before, 3:7; **2:1**).
 - ✓ He appeared to destroy the works of the devil — 3:8. The devil would have us love the world (2:15ff), but Christ came to destroy that work.
 - ✓ His life is exemplary (and worthy of emulation) — 2:6. There is an "ought-ness" to our spiritual lives — a natural consequence of belief in Christ is living like Christ (also, 3:7).
 - ✓ He gives commands that must be obeyed — **2:3-4**, 7-8; 3:22-23, 24; 4:21; 5:2-3
 - ✓ Christ came to free us to live righteously. Obedience to God is the normal life of the believer. Christ came to earth to enable us to live that way.

- *What John says about the believer's life:* the life that has been saved will be sanctified. There will be evidence in every believer's life that Christ is working in him and changing him.
 - ✓ Perhaps he will be changed from one who loved the world to one who hates the world (2:15).
 - ✓ Perhaps he is known as one who uncompromisingly does the will of God — even at cost to him (2:17).
 - ✓ Perhaps he is known as someone who habitually does what is right (2:29).
 - ✓ Perhaps he is known as someone who, when he sins confesses his sin (1:9). Though he sins, he does not cultivate ongoing habits of sin, but fights against the flesh and sin (3:6-8).
 - ✓ Perhaps he is known as one who particularly loves other believers (3:11, 14). Remember that this is what Jesus said would be our unique testimony to the world (Jn. 13:34-35).
 - ✓ Perhaps he is known as one who no longer hates those who hate him (3:15-16).
 - ✓ Perhaps he no longer is fearful of death and the judgment of God (2:28).
 - ✓ Perhaps he longs for the return of Christ (3:2-3).
 - ✓ Perhaps he is extraordinarily generous with his possessions (3:17).
 - ✓ All these combine to mean the believer will be changed and transformed.
 - ✓ The best way to say this might be that there is no belief in Christ without obedience to Christ. The believer in Christ is not rebellious against Christ (2:17). This is what Jesus affirmed in John's gospel (14:15, 21, 23-24; 15:10). The NT knows nothing about an unchanged believer. God sent Christ to remove and cancel the debt of sin and unchain the power of sin and the Holy Spirit is given by Christ so that we can live in His power and do righteousness. The Spirit of God *will* produce the fruit of Christ in the man saved by God.
- Now at this point, you may say, “but Terry, that's impossible — I still do sin...Are you saying I'm not a Christian?” When I read this book in my college years I had the same doubts and questions. When we say, “the life that has been saved will be sanctified,” we also mean these things:
 - ✓ This does not mean that every life will be changed equally (Mt. 13:8).
 - ✓ This does not mean that every life will be changed in the same time frame.
 - ✓ This does not mean there will not be struggles along the way (1:8; 2:1-2).
 - ✓ This does not mean that *any* life will be fully sanctified prior to heaven.
 - ✓ But this *does* mean that there will be evidence in every believer's life of some transforming work that can only be attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit.
 - ✓ This is our assurance — we know that God is the one who secures our salvation; He keeps and protects and changes us; and we know that we belong to Him when we see evidence of His work in our lives.

- When I was 8-10 years-old, I was plagued by questions about my salvation. I remember many Saturday mornings watching cartoons on TV, but my mind drifting to the judgment of God. I knew that I deserved His wrath and I knew I couldn't defend myself against that wrath and so I asked him to forgive me. Not once, not twice, but many times. And each time I'd get up relieved that it was settled, only to have the same experience again the following Saturday. I'd wonder, "Did I really believe? Was I really sorry for my sin..."
- Now someone might have said to me at that point (no one did), "Terry, just write down in your Bible the day you believe and then if you ever doubt, you'll always know that you are saved." But as J. D. Greear says, the Bible talks about assurance in a different manner:

*"Instead of asking Jesus for a 'certificate' of salvation, you start believing what God's Word says about His Lordship and His completed work at the cross. You understand that you have lived in rebellion against the rule of God and have no hope of escaping God's wrath on your own. You 'kneel' in submission to His claim on your life, and rest your hope of heaven upon Him. Picture this as hopping up into His arms, submitting to go wherever He takes you, and trusting in Him to carry you into heaven. If at some point in the future you begin to doubt whether or not you really have put faith in Jesus, do you look backwards to try and remember that moment when you first hopped up into His arms? I suppose you could. Better, though, would be to look at where you are currently resting. If you are right now resting in His arms, knowing when you began to rest is less important than that you are doing it now. Your present posture is more important than a past memory. **Conversion is not completing a ritual, it is commencing a relationship. The assurance of ritual is based on accurate words and memory. The assurance of relationship is based on a present posture of repentance and belief.**...Don't try to find assurance from a prayer you prayed in the past; find assurance by resting in the present on what Jesus did in the past. If you are resting right now in what Jesus did two thousand years ago to save you, then, if never before, you are saved at this moment, even if you don't signify it with a prayer. It is the relationship to Christ that saves, not the prayer that signified the beginning of that relationship. When you started to rest is not as important as the fact that you are doing it now." [J. D. Greear, Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart: How to Know for Sure You Are Saved, 42-43, 47; my emphasis.]*

- ✓ Again, our assurance is not that we have done something to merit God's salvation, but that being unworthy and unable to accomplish salvation, we look to Him for salvation and then He transforms and changes our lives from the inside out. We are not perfect, but we are progressing. A story by Greear makes this point:

"I once had a friend whose six-year-old daughter approached him about 'accepting Jesus.' Because he didn't know any other way of explaining it, he led her in a prayer in which she asked Jesus into her heart. About a week later she came to him and said, 'Dad, how big was Jesus?' He said, 'I don't know. He was a grown man, but people were shorter back then. Maybe about 5' 10"?' 'Daddy, how tall am I?' 'About 3' 6".' 'Daddy, I'm confused. If Jesus was 5' 10' and I am 3' 6", and Jesus came into my heart, shouldn't He just kind of poke out everywhere?' There is some profound truth in what my friend's daughter said. [Stop Asking Jesus Into Your Heart, 102.]

3. Summary

- What we often say about salvation is that Christ's death has freed us from the penalty of our sin — God is no longer angry with us and will never pour His wrath on us. But salvation is not just about getting out of hell for free. It is also about having the power of sin removed from us, so that we who could do nothing to please God, now can do acts of righteousness (Romans 6). And this is John's emphasis throughout the book. The one who has been saved will also be transformed now. He won't be sinless (1:8; 2:1-2), but he will be moving towards Christlikeness (1:7; 2:1; 3:3...).
 - ✓ John is not saying that we are kept (made secure) by our works of righteousness, but our righteous works demonstrate (give assurance) that we are kept by God — we have been saved. So over the course of these five chapters, John will offer test after test to determine whether or not what we are doing and how we are living really is indicative of true salvation.
 - ✓ Right believing will produce right living and right living will result in a right confidence in Christ who is keeping us.
 - ✓ Assurance is not given to everyone who has prayed a prayer, but assurance is given to those who continue to believe in Christ alone for their salvation from the penalty and power of sin.
- So we are secure and can have assurance. First John is written to assure readers of their salvation through tests of their doctrine and morality — what they believe and what they do (5:13).

4. Application

- My balance in this sermon series is two-fold —
 - ✓ Encourage those who are genuinely saved when they are doubting.
 - ✓ Discourage those who believe they are saved when they have no evidence of salvation.

- Are you believing in Jesus Christ for your salvation?
 - ✓ Do you believe that on your own, you deserve God's eternal wrath and infinite punishment?
 - ✓ Do you believe that Christ absorbed that wrath and took God's punishment and thereby has also freed you from the entangling power of sin so that now you can live righteously and you can please God with your life?
 - ✓ (I am not asking when you began to believe this; I am asking if this is what you now believe.)
 - ✓ Is there evidence of the work of God in your life to change you?
 - Are you someone who naturally is prone to anger, but by God's grace you are less angry and more joyful? That's love and joy.
 - Are you someone who finds security in possessions and struggles with greed (and have accumulated much debt in your quest for safety), but you are becoming increasingly disciplined with how you spend your money and are even resisting temptations to shop online because you are intentionally feeding your mind with God's Word on contentment? That's self-control.
 - Are you someone who has idolized marriage and family and has made a wreck of too many relationships but now are seeking to please God in how you think about relationships? Are you finding that even though you don't have a girlfriend or children (if you are married) you aren't anxious about it because you are content with being part of God's family? That's peace.
 - Do you still have a struggle (or struggles) with a particular sin, but when you sin you grieve and are broken-hearted and you are quick to confess and seek restoration to God? That's fighting against the flesh.
 - These are some of the kinds of demonstration of the work of the spirit of God (Gal. 5:22ff).
 - (If you aren't sure if there are evidences of transformation, ask those who know you best...)
- Perhaps this morning you are saying, "Yes, I'm a Christian," but you just don't care about God, Christ, Scripture, or being holy and transformed. You are like many who say, "I did that..." but you have never really been changed. Life now is like life was before you say you became a Christian. You gladly sinned then and you gladly sin now. Then there is a question whether or not you are a Christian.
 - ✓ Believe in Him — that He has satisfied the wrath of God on the cross and that He has conquered the power of sin (2:1-2).
 - ✓ Live for Him — 2:3 — not because you can earn His favor by your obedience, but because you are demonstrating your love for Him.