

## **Stations of Life**

1 John 2:12-14

An idea that has become increasingly interesting to me is that of stations of life. Defined periods of life. And the reason this is so interesting to me is the realization of how much we might struggle because we don't understand or even embrace those specific stages of life. Or we don't know how to make the transition from one stage to another. Too easily, you can become discontent in your current station in life, longing for what is still future. Or you can become harmfully nostalgic, longing for the good old days in the past. Neither of those is helpful at all. Learning to embrace the station of life to which God has assigned you is vital for healthy and productive living.

For me as an adult, as a pastor, those stages of life are defined by the different churches I have served. From the first church in Indiana, where we lived for only 3 years. Then the 2 churches I pastored for about 10 years each, though very different. And then, the disastrous 6 years in Atlanta, followed by the very happy and settled station of life here in Mt. Airy these past four years.

For me, there were also the stations of life corresponding to childhood through high school, as I was born and raised in the same suburban town just south of Buffalo, NY where I lived until I went away to college. Then my college years, my year working as an engineer, and my four years of seminary training. All of those define specific stages of life. And my transition from seminary to ordination as a pastor also corresponded with my marriage, and both marriage then, later, children also define those stations, or stages of life. Family-wise, it is now the stage of young-adult children, not that we are empty-nesters exactly, but neither do we have young children in our home any longer. All of

those are important definitions of life, and all of those stages of life have shaped me and define who I am today.

Many people, probably most, would identify fewer stations in their life than I do, and, of course, there is no defined biblical pattern of what those stages look like, nor should they be the same for everyone. But I say all of that this morning because it introduces John's subject in our text, where he identifies significant stations of life for a Christian. And he mentions only three. Little children. Young men. And fathers.

Now, I recognize that the masculine gender is used, and I believe there is no intent by the apostle to ignore or demean the presence of young women and mothers. I believe they are all included equally, though the language and the words used are masculine in gender just to avoid the awkwardness of what is today typically called gender-inclusive language.

So three stages of life. Three stations in life. Little children, or those young in their faith. Then, in John's sequence, the fathers and mothers. The mature. The faithful, who have walked with the Lord a long time. Then, in the middle, whom John labels as young men. And young women. Those whom we might call young adults today. Not children, to be sure, but still growing up and maturing as adults just as surely. Let's look more closely at what characterizes those three stations of a Christian's life. First,

### **I. THE INNOCENT JOY OF CHILDREN IN CHRIST.**

v.12a

That's where it all starts. That's where it is all supposed to start! That is typically the first realization of what salvation is all about, which Christianity really means. Your sins are forgiven.

Little children have an honored place within the kingdom of God. Do you remember Jesus' own words,

Mat. 18:1 "At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2 Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, 3 and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me."

There are lots of reasons to explain that, and among them, I would say, is this awareness of forgiveness of sins. Little children are open and honest, they are simple and straightforward. And when it comes to religious thoughts, what matters most in the young heart and mind of a little child is that Jesus dies for their sins.

What a blessed testimony, and children very young can often speak those words with full sincerity. Jesus died for my sins. That's the first awareness young children have of what Christianity is all about. And some of you no doubt had such a profession of faith very early in your lives. That's where it starts. And in that simplicity, there is great joy. That's what we are to have as the foundation of what it means to be a Christian. To be like children.

**A. Children have the joy of knowing that their sins are forgiven in Jesus Christ.**

When Paul wrote to the troubled church at Corinth, he identified all their awful and terrible sins, then writes these words of great encouragement,

1 Cor. 6:11 "And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the

name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God."

When Paul began preaching on his first missionary journey, this was the conclusion of his sermon,

Acts 13:38 "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; 39 and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses."

That's not the children's sermon, that's the gospel!

In the prophetic words of Isaiah describing the New Covenant, we read this,

Jer. 31:34 "No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

And in the theological definitions of,

Eph. 1:7 "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, 9 having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself."

Also, Col. 1:3 "He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, 14 in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins."

At it's root level, redemption is the forgiveness of sins. Salvation is the forgiveness of sins. And the simple reality of that is what I am calling the innocent joy of children. Jesus died for my sins. And as I preach to you this morning, may that child-like

joy be yours. Above all else. That by faith, you might know and believe that your sins are forgiven because Jesus died on the cross to save you.

I still remember the night when the Lord saved me. For me, it was a specific moment in time. I wasn't a little child, but I was young, only 12. And until that night I could only think that if I went to church regularly enough and read the Bible, I would be saved. So I had to learn, first, that I was a sinner who deserved God's wrath and judgment. And then I had to learn that those very sins were forgiven because of what Jesus did for me. I learned just that, 47 years ago next month. That is the child-like joy of knowing that our sins are forgiven.

v.12

John mentions children again in,  
v.13b "I write to you, little children, Because you have known the Father."

That is to say,

### **B. Children have the joy of personal fellowship with God their father.**

And that is the benefit and delight of children. Access and affection by their mother and father. For a Christian, God our father ceases to be the judge in a courtroom and becomes our heavenly father. God our father ceases to be the one ruling as the master of slaves and becomes the one with all the recognizable attributes of a loving and affectionate parent. And children receive their rightful inheritance!

Rom. 8:14 "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." 16 The Spirit Himself bears witness with

our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together."

Gal. 4:4 "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" 7 Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ."

That's the gospel. That is the gospel so thoroughly enjoyed by those who come to God as little children. That is the innocent joy of children in Christ. And that is the initial station of life for a Christian. And that's a joy that you should all long for, and pursue in your own devotion and personal relationship with God. For if you are a Christian, you have "received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.'"

John then moves on to another group, and he identifies fathers. Those mature in their faith, represented by comparison to little children as fathers, and mothers. And what is described is,

### **II. THE STABLE MATURITY OF FATHERS IN CHRIST.**

John says the same thing twice about fathers, that they "have known Him who is from the beginning." They have known God, with a depth and stability and quiet confidence that comes with the maturity of age and experience.

The Bible always honors age, unlike our society. The Bible always ascribes honor to the reputation earned by experience. Consider these words,

Titus 2:1 "But as for you, speak the things which are proper

for sound doctrine: 2 that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience; 3 the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things— 4 that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, 5 to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed.”

Do you see in that description words of maturity? Words of godliness and strength of faith that can only come with age and experience. Words like sober, reverent, temperate, discreet, chaste. That’s the goal, beloved. That’s the mark we ought to aim for. Not simply knowledge, head knowledge, or theological knowledge. Not just being thoroughly reformed or any other sub-category. This is what matters. This is what defines godliness, the stable maturity of those who have lived life with the Lord and learned by experience the character of the heart with which God is pleased.

And where does that come from? Not from reading a book, that is for sure.

**A. Fathers get their maturity from an intimate relationship with God stabilized by many years of commitment.**

v.13 “I write to you, fathers, Because you have known Him...”

What a wonderful description. “Because you have known Him...” Be assured, that means far more than our normal use of the word “know.” It refers to an intimate relationship, the type of relationship built and stabilized by years and years of commitment. It doesn’t happen quickly at all. I’m not much of a wine drinker, but it is like the aging of a good wine. The ripening of a good fruit.

Fathers are those who have known God. For years. I remember early in my Christian life seeking out such relationships. The example, and even the friendship, of those who had walked with the Lord many more years than I had. There are several men, and women, who stand out in my mind. These words are so encouraging, as John writes to those fathers, identifying them as such. And his words also give us a mark for our aspirations. Maybe you would consider the station of your life to be in that third group, the young men and women, and perhaps that would be the majority of us. If so, this is the goal, to aspire to this sort of stable maturity, this sort of intimate relationship with God that would be characterized by John’s words here,

v.13 “I write to you, fathers, Because you have known Him who is from the beginning.”

And, v.14 “I have written to you, fathers, Because you have known Him who is from the beginning.”

There is something else important there, as well, the last phrase of that sentence. “Because you have known Him who is from the beginning.” So,

**B. Fathers get their maturity from a deep confidence in God’s unchangeableness.**

“You have known Him who is from the beginning.” Meaning, you know that God is eternal and unchangeable. You know that God has always existed, and that he is not a man that he should change. God has always remained the same, he is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end.

Theologically, I have known that for a long time. I have been completely convinced of that since very early on in my theological study and training. And it has always affected my life. Increasingly so the older that I get. I have much to learn still, in

the experiences of life, but the root of my own confidence and self-awareness is this consciousness of God's unchangeableness.

Isaiah has emphasized this idea in his context of Israel being sent into exile in Babylon and then redeemed and brought back from that exile. In the midst of those prophecies, as the climax of the hope of the gospel presented in those ending chapters of the book of Isaiah, the prophet keeps coming back to this one main theme.

Isaiah 46:9 "Remember the former things of old, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, 10 Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done, Saying, My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure,' 11 Calling a bird of prey from the east, The man who executes My counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it. 12 "Listen to Me, you stubborn-hearted, Who are far from righteousness: 13 I bring My righteousness near, it shall not be far off; My salvation shall not linger. And I will place salvation in Zion, For Israel My glory."

"I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning." Or,

Isaiah 45:5 "I am the Lord, and there is no other; There is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me, 6 That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting That there is none besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; 7 I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the Lord, do all these things."

That confidence is the very foundation of the gospel itself.

Isaiah 45:21 "Who has told it from that time? Have not I, the

Lord? And there is no other God besides Me, A just God and a Savior; There is none besides Me. 22 "Look to Me, and be saved, All you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. 23 I have sworn by Myself; The word has gone out of My mouth in righteousness, And shall not return, That to Me every knee shall bow, Every tongue shall take an oath."

These words have never been more appropriate than they are today, a day unlike any other in which any of us have lived, a day in which the whole world does not know the end from the beginning. We do not know the end of this world crisis caused by this coronavirus, COVID-19. We do not know when it will even be safe to leave our homes, or to stand closer to each other than 6 feet. We do not know how long this will last, when the curve will flatten, when the virus will fade away, when the sickness and death will peak and when it will come to an end. We don't know, and no one is particularly happy in that realization. To say that it is a time of great stress is a dramatic understatement. We just don't know.

But this is what fathers in the faith know in the midst of all that. They have known God from the beginning, throughout all the circumstances of life. And they have learned, not as a matter of intellectual awareness, but as a matter of life experience, they have learned this about God.

Isaiah 45:5 "I am the Lord, and there is no other; There is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me, 6 That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting That there is none besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; 7 I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the Lord, do all these things."

May God give us the blessing of such maturity, even as we endure the present crisis!

Then, the third group. The young men. And young women. The young adults, to use the expressions of our age. Now, interestingly, typically, in our day, the general impression of young adults in our culture is one of immaturity. Think, college students partying on South Beach in Miami last week, totally oblivious to the dangers and sobriety of the world all around them. Actually, just think of college age “young adult” enjoying themselves in the typical spring break rituals every year in Florida. Think, irresponsible. Think, immature. We use words like juvenile and adolescent as an insult, reflecting the observed childishness of those who should know better. But that’s not the picture of young adults which John gives us. That’s not the description of this middle station of life for a Christian. Quite the opposite. What John presents to us is,

### **III. THE VITAL STRENGTH OF YOUNG MEN IN CHRIST.**

So this is not a season of weakness and immaturity, but strength.

v.13b “I write to you, young men, Because you have overcome the wicked one.”

v.14b “I have written to you, young men, Because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, And you have overcome the wicked one.”

The chief characteristic, humanity speaking, of the young is strength. Health and vitality. Verse 14, “you are strong.” Indeed, you are! That’s true physically. And according to John’s encouragements, that is also true spiritually.

#### **A. Young men have the strength to turn their spiritual conflicts into conquest.**

Look at the description given,

v.13b “I write to you, young men, Because you have overcome the wicked one.”

So the chief characteristic of this station in life is that their lives begin to bear the fruit of victory over sin. They have the strength to turn their spiritual conflicts into conquest. They start winning the battles. Not that the battles go away, but they start winning them.

What an encouragement! What a challenge! And I believe it should be both! It is the same encouragement and exhortation as what Paul writes in,

Rom. 6:11 “Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. 13 And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. 14 For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.”

The implication is not sinless perfection, as John has already acknowledged that we cannot claim to be without sin. But this station of life involves doing battle with that sin, and experiencing the reality that you are actually able, by God’s grace, to put sin to death, more and more.

Paul describes that process with these words,

Eph. 4:20 “But you have not so learned Christ, 21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: 22 that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, 23 and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.”

That’s the stage of life that comes after little children. And

that's the goal of much of the ministry of the church, much of my pastoral ministry, that you grow up from being little children and become those who overcome the evil one. There is no secret formula here, no mysterious method or special formula. There are no complicated instructions. Just something very simple.

**B. Young men gain their spiritual strength from God's word.**

v.14b "I have written to you, young men, Because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, And you have overcome the wicked one."

That's how we gain spiritual strength, by living in God's word. The secret of our strength and the source of our victory over sin is the word of God living in us. Thus the psalmist prays,

Psalm 119:9 "How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word. 10 With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! 11 Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You."

So what is your station in life? You may still be a little child, and that's not an insult. Indeed, you should never lose the sense of the joy of a little child who has come to know and believe that your sins are forgiven. And, I hope, you will aspire to the faithful maturity of a father or mother. There is not a defined line that your cross over to achieve that status, and some of you would well fit that category, albeit none of us perfectly. But that is the goal.

I believe the emphasis of this text is upon the middle group, and all of us know what that is in our own experience, to one degree or another. So whatever station of life might best describe you, let this be increasing true and descriptive of your life as a

Christian.

v.14b "I have written to you, young men, Because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, And you have overcome the wicked one."