

All Can Know They Are Saved

1 John 5:1-15

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We're continuing our series on the "Four Alls" of Wesleyan/Methodist teaching. We've seen that *all need to be saved* (because of sin) and *all can be saved* (because of God's grace). Now we see that *all can know they are saved* (because of God's faithfulness and the witness of the Holy Spirit).

A pastor was talking to a man who said he wasn't sure he was a Christian. He hoped so and thought perhaps he might be. The pastor asked, "Are you married?" The man said, "Yes."

"How do you know?"

He had stood before a pastor and a congregation with his bride and made promises and vows. He had a signed marriage license (Bruce Larson tells this story in one of his books, but I can't find it now).

That's a good illustration of knowing something through personal experience, of the commitment involved in beginning a relationship. But, most of us don't get out our marriage license and review it—or even the vows we made at our wedding. More likely, we remember how we met and what brought us together. Wedding pictures help us remember the event when our married life began. While we know we got married, we also affirm our commitment to being loving and faithful now and our intention to continue being loving and faithful.

In our life with God, can we know that we're saved? Can we know that we are God's children? Our Scripture reading assures us that we can. Several times in this passage, and throughout the letter, John talks about how we know certain things, the testimony we're given, and the confidence we have. He's writing about true knowledge and confidence in response to false teachers who said that real knowledge of God's wisdom is just for an elite group. John says that knowledge of God is offered to everyone. It's open and free to all who believe. God is revealed in the real world we live in, not in some hidden mystical realm.

Several times John mentions believing as the basis for knowing:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ/Messiah is born of God (v 1)

Those who are born of God overcome the world and those who overcome the world are those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God (vv 4, 5)

Those who believe in the Son of God have this testimony or witness [of God and the Spirit] (v 10)

"I 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" (v 13)

Believing that Jesus is the Christ or believing in the name of Jesus or that Jesus is the Son of God means more than just acknowledging that Jesus is the promised Messiah. It means having faith in him and being in union with Jesus, who has been revealed "in the flesh" (4:2) as the Messiah and Son of God (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*).

Whoever lives in that kind of faith relationship with God is born of God. And whoever loves the father loves his child as well. If we love God, we'll love God's children. This is how we know we love God's children: we love God and do what God commands. To love God is to obey God. And to obey God is to love one another.

We tend to resist that word "obey." But God's commands are not a crushing burden. They're intended for our well-being and life. God's will is challenging, because it goes against the grain of the world's way. But God's will is not burdensome. We thrive in the way of God's righteousness, but we're stunted and confused when we walk in the way of unrighteousness (Earl Palmer, *1, 2, 3 John and Revelation, The Communicator's Commentary*).

Someone once asked if God always wants us to do what we don't want to do the most (Bob Benson, *Something's Going on Here* 147). God really is like a good shepherd who leads us beside still waters, restores our soul, and guides us in right paths for his name's sake. God knows that we're truly fulfilled when we're living the way God made us and redeemed us to

live. God doesn't want to increase our burden; he wants to increase our vision.

God's commands aren't burdensome because the new life God plants in members of his family includes a new desire to do God's will and the power actually to do it. In our life in Christ there is power to overcome the world, that is, everything that's opposed to God. Faith, that relationship of trust in and union with God through Jesus, is the victory that overcomes all that resists God.

All can know they are saved through the witness of Jesus Christ. He came by water and the blood. That means baptism and crucifixion. There was a man named Cerinthus around John's time who taught that the divine Christ spirit came upon Jesus at his baptism, but left him before the crucifixion. John insists that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came "not with the water only but with the water and the blood." Jesus dying on the cross is just as truly the Messiah and Son of God as he was when he was baptized in the Jordan River.

So the water of Jesus' baptism (and the testimony of the Father and the Spirit at that event) testifies that Jesus is really human and really divine. We might also recall the water that flowed from Jesus' side when he was on the cross and a Roman soldier pierced him with a spear. His death was real. The blood of Jesus, his sacrifice on the cross, testifies to his real death to save us. The Spirit of truth, who is the truth, also testifies or bears witness to the truth of Jesus.

John Wesley liked to preach on the idea in Romans 8:16 that the Spirit of God witnesses or testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Wesley said that the witness of our own spirit is based on reading God's promises in the Bible and looking at our lives to see if we believe, if we love one another, if we have the fruit of the Holy Spirit in us. From that we infer that we must be justified, born anew, saved.

Wesley also said that at the same time there's a direct witness of the Holy Spirit to us, letting us know that we're saved, that we're God's children, enabling us to call God "Abba, Father." This isn't something we conclude from looking at evidence. It's not something outside us, but it's inside knowledge. If your knee hurts, you have direct knowledge of your pain.

When the Holy Spirit bears witness to you, you have direct knowledge of God's presence, that God accepts you, that you belong to the Lord.

Wesley said this assurance is offered to all of God's children. Despite struggles, doubts, and questions, we can know that we know God for ourselves. We can know we're saved because the Spirit of God lets us know through this gift of assurance. We can know it because we trust that God is true to his promises to forgive us and give us new life when we put our faith in him. And we can know it because we see how we're changing as we walk with God. Love for God and other people is filling our hearts. We're joyful. We have peace. We serve and help and bless others. And think of all the other fruit of God's life being produced in your life. (Sermons: "The Witness of the Spirit" I and II. Also see William J. Abraham, *Wesley for Armchair Theologians* 92-102)

1 John also tells about the witness of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit witnesses through the scriptures. The Holy Spirit is the "Spirit of prophecy" whose words are fulfilled in Jesus. The Spirit witnesses in the church, the believing community. The Spirit witnesses in the hearts of believers, giving us God's own testimony that God has sent Jesus, that Jesus is for real, and that we belong to him, that we're loved and forgiven and free. God's testimony is the greatest. And God has testified about his Son—especially in Jesus' baptism, transfiguration, and resurrection.

Again, if we believe in the Son of God we have this testimony. We accept God's testimony as true and we have the witness of God's Spirit in us. The inward witness of God's Spirit shows that we're right to believe in Jesus. This "internal testimony" of the Spirit goes together with the external and historical witness of the "water and blood," the baptism and death of Jesus, the beginning and end of his earthly ministry (Stephen Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John. The Word Biblical Commentary*).

God has given us eternal life. This life is in God's Son. You can know that you are God's child, that you're saved, forgiven, and will be with God forever. "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life." If you believe in Jesus, the Son of God, you already have eternal life—the life of new creation, God's kind of life. This assurance of salvation, this knowing we're God's children, doesn't rely so much on

something we did “once upon a time,” but on having faith in Jesus right now. Do you have that faith?

Believing, having faith, living in this relationship with God through Christ, loving God’s children, trusting the witnesses God gives, knowing that we have eternal life—all of this is part of the confidence we have before God. Four times in this letter, John writes about our confidence with God (2:28; 3:21; 4:17; 5:14-15). Here it means the free access and freedom of speech that the children of God enjoy as we come to our heavenly Father to bring our requests to him. Another way we know that we’re God’s children is that we have this kind of boldness/openness/confidence with God. We learn God’s will and pray for it. We know that God hears us and we receive what we ask.

Too much of our praying—maybe I should say too much of *my* praying is feeble and hesitant. But we can know God’s good will and pray according to it. We can pray for what God guides us to pray for, what God inspires us to pray for. In that kind of praying, we have confidence that we receive what we ask of God. Let’s grow in that kind of prayer. Sin still makes it easy to be deceived or to deceive ourselves. But we can trust the grace of God to enable us to overcome sin and to grow in God’s will.

Over the years, a few times I’ve come across this advice on prayer: “Pray as you can, and do not try to pray as you can’t.” I just discovered that that line came from an English monk named John Chapman who lived in the late 1800s-early 1900s. He was trying to help people who were struggling with their life of prayer

[\(https://theotherjournal.com/2012/08/23/pray-as-you-can-not-as-you-cant-exploring-a-prayer-slogan/\)](https://theotherjournal.com/2012/08/23/pray-as-you-can-not-as-you-cant-exploring-a-prayer-slogan/).

God starts with us where we are. We start where we are in knowing the Lord and in prayer. One of my favorite illustrations of this that I use often is to imagine parents giving their three-year-old a coloring book and a box of crayons. Later, she gives them her first picture. She’s colored the sun black, the grass purple, and the sky green. There are marks and squiggles all over the picture. Now, do parents tell the three-year-old that’s wrong and throw away the picture? Of course not. We tell her what a great

job she did, stick the picture on the refrigerator, call the grandparents to tell them about it, and brag to our friends about our child's talent.

Writing about that, Brennan Manning concludes, "A little child cannot do a bad coloring; nor can a child of God do bad prayer." Then he quotes another author:

A father is delighted when his little one, leaving off her toys and friends, runs to him and climbs into his arms. As he holds his little one close to him, he cares little whether the child is looking around, her attention flitting from one thing to another, or just settling down to sleep. Essentially the child is choosing to be with her father, confident of the love, the care, the security that is hers in those arms. Our prayer is much like that. We settle down in our Father's arms, in his loving hands. Our mind, our thoughts, our imagination may flit about here and there; we might even fall asleep; but essentially we are choosing for this time to remain intimately with our Father, giving ourselves to him, receiving his love and care, letting him enjoy us It is very simple prayer. It is very childlike prayer. It is prayer that opens us out to all the delights of the kingdom. (*The Ragamuffin Gospel* 155)

John wants the people to whom he's writing to know that kind of relationship with God. In the face of persecution, adversity, and opposition from false teachers, he wants them to know that they are in the truth—to know that they have eternal life in God's Son, Jesus. God is speaking through what John wrote to help us know these things as well.

Do you know that you are a child of God, that you belong to God, that you have openness/boldness/confidence in God's presence? We know these things when we believe in Jesus, trust him, and live in union with him. That faith bears the fruit of love in our lives. We know we are God's children because we love each other as God in Christ loves us. We also know that our faith is real because we have the Scriptures that tell about God's action in Jesus and God's testimony about Jesus. We know that we know God because we have the witness of God's Holy Spirit in our hearts, confirming what we believe and confirming us as God's own beloved children. That

comes with knowing Jesus through faith. All who have this faith can know they are saved by God's grace.