



THAT YOU MAY KNOW: A STUDY OF FIRST JOHN

LESSON 8: "Assurance and the Anticipation of Glory"

TEXT: 1 John 2:28–3:3

In 1988, Edgar C. Whisenant published his infamous book, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*. Through a bizarre method of biblical interpretation known as "numerology" (finding hidden messages in the numbers of the Bible and in counting the letters of certain words), Whisenant claimed that he uncovered thousands of biblical clues which indicated that the rapture described in 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17 would occur at some point during Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) in 1988—sometime between the dates of September 11 and September 13.

Whisenant integrated these so-called "biblical clues" with other bits of information he collected from US Defense Department manuals, the teachings of a radical Jewish Rabbi, and even statements from pop scientist Carl Sagan. His book, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*, was published through World Bible Society with the help of a wealthy Christian broadcaster. Some 300,000 copies were mailed free of charge to church leaders across the country, while a whopping 4.5 million copies were sold in bookstores. The book became so popular that it reached the #2 spot on the Christian Bookseller Association's most popular books of 1988.

So convinced was Whisenant that he stated, "only if the Bible is in error am I wrong; and I say that to every preacher in town." He even reportedly pledged, "if there were a king in this country and I could gamble with my life, I would stake my life on Rosh Hashana '88."

When his prediction was proven wrong, Whisenant updated his calculation from September 11–13 to October 3, 1988. When it was proven wrong again, he postponed it by one year, concluding that he had not factored in a "year zero" in his counting of the years of history. He published his updated prediction in a second book entitled, *The Final Shout*, in which he set the date for September 1, 1989. That prediction also failed, at which time he set it for 1993, which also proved to be false.

Whisenant's failed predictions quickly became a source of ridicule in the secular media as well as among many Christians. But his error resulted in some good—at least for a time. It sparked a backlash from Christians against any attempt to set dates for the next event in God's redemptive program and highlighted the dangers of a subjective, arbitrary handling of the biblical text.

Yet the example of Whisenant easily leads some Christians to apathy—if not antipathy—toward the doctrine of the end times. Futile predictions about Christ's second coming become a powerful excuse to conclude that talk about the future is generally speculative, divisive, and unhelpful. For such Christians, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988* is just one more proof that the Bible is too obscure about future things, or that most of what it seems to teach about the future is really about the present. They contend that what the church needs most is more emphasis on this present age and this present world rather than all the distractions and ridicule that come from debates about the world to come. They warn of the danger of becoming so heavenly-minded that one loses any motivation to do the earth any good.

But as the adage goes, *abuse does not negate use*. Wayward approaches to eschatology should never give way to the conclusion that the topic of eschatology is trivial. After all, it is difficult to go very far in the Bible before coming across teaching that deals with *future things*. Future things mattered to the biblical writers, and they frequently appealed to these things as crucial motivations for the present. As James Montgomery Boice observed, "[The second coming of Christ] is mentioned 318 times in the 260 chapters of the New Testament. It is mentioned in every one of the New Testament books, with the exception of Galatians . . . and the very short books such as 2 and 3 John and Philemon" (*The Epistles of John*, 96). Similarly, Richard Mayhue has stated,

Scripture teems with prophetic material. . . . All nine authors of the NT mention Christ's second coming. Next to the subject of faith/salvation, the theme of Christ's second coming is most prominent in the NT. . . . Of the approximately 333 specific Bible prophecies dealing with Christ's two advents, one-third deal with His first coming and two-thirds deal with His second coming. ("Why Study Prophecy?," in *Christ's Prophetic Plans*, ed. MacArthur and Mayhue, 14)

1 John 2:28–3:3 – “Assurance and the Anticipation of Glory”

The apostle John is one of those biblical writers who speaks much of future things. He does most obviously in the book of Revelation, but he also incorporates eschatology into his writing of 1 John. John skillfully weaves the topic of eschatology into his treatment of the doctrine of assurance, explaining that a robust hope in the future events of God’s redemptive plan is a key influence on the believer and his experience of confidence in the present moment. John writes,

Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming. If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him. See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and *such* we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope *fixed* on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. —1 John 2:28–3:3

Our study of this text will be organized around three headings: I. The Pathway to Assurance (2:28–29); II. The Reason for Assurance (3:1); and III. The Promotion of Assurance (3:2–3).

I. The Pathway to Assurance (2:28–29)

John signals the beginning of a new section in 2:28 with the words, “**Now, little children.**” Nonetheless, the focus of this next section isn’t unfamiliar to John’s audience; he has already exhorted his readers to recognize that the next stage of God’s redemptive plan was *imminent*: “Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour” (2:18). Now, John develops this concept of the *imminent future* further.

“IMMINENCE” – “The condition of something that could happen at any time or is about to happen. When applied to the second coming, the term means that Christ could return at any time” (MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 931).

But before turning to this focus on the future, it is important to note that John once again addresses his audience as “**little children**” (2:28; see also 2:1). He does so not to disparage them, but because he sees his audience as his pastoral responsibility and because he sees them as *genuine believers*. This designation would have brought his readers encouragement.

John’s exhortation to them is to “**abide in Him**” (2:28)—that is, “in Christ.” The verb “**abide**” is theologically profound. John uses it 24x in 1 John (e.g., see 1 John 2:6) and 41x in his Gospel. The verb doesn’t simply mean “be located in” as if he was referring to some form of superficial identification. The verb has the idea of “remain intimately united to.” It describes *a relationship of continual and intentional dependency and communion*. “Abiding” is an intentional way of life—one that actively and persistently acknowledges Christ as the greatest treasure in life and strives to do everything in a way that depends upon and brings glory to Him. (For more on this concept of *abiding*, see John 15:4–10, esp. vv. 4–5).

John wants to motivate his readers to this lifestyle of dependency, and so he introduces an important *purpose* for this “abiding” when he writes, “**so that when He appears**” (2:28). Interestingly, John uses this verb “appear” with respect to Christ in two different ways in his letter—either to refer to Christ’s *first* coming (see 1:2; 3:5, 8) or, as here, to refer to His *second* coming (see 2:28; 3:2). In other words, John wants the reality of this climactic future event—the second coming of Christ—to be forefront in his readers’ minds so that they would be motivated to live dependently upon Him—to “abide in Him”—in the present.

In particular, John focuses attention on an aspect of Christ’s second advent that every believer will experience: *standing before the judgment seat of Christ* (see Rom 14:10–13; 1 Cor 3:10–15; 2 Cor 5:9–11). John notes that in that moment, believers will generally experience one of two responses: either “**confidence**” or “**shame**” (1 John 2:28). The former term describes a “boldness in speech” (see how it is used for *praying* in 3:21 and 5:14) that every believer wishes he might have as he appears before Christ. This confidence is not a prideful

assessment of one's own worthiness or the merits of one's works of righteousness, but an unshakable trust in the appropriateness of believing in and abiding in Christ. The latter term, "shame," is the opposite of this kind of "confidence." It describes the feeling of disgrace when all of one's motives and actions are revealed for what they were.

Surprising to many, John believes that it is **possible for believers to experience such "confidence" when they stand before the judgment seat of Christ**. In fact, John *wants* his readers to be motivated by this real possibility. He was fully convinced that this experience of confidence before Christ would be worth every single effort to abide in Christ. So, out of pastoral affection, John pleads with his audience to contemplate this future event, and then to let this consideration powerfully affect present-day living. As D. Edmond Hiebert states, "John believed that our prophetic hope exerts a practical impact upon present Christian living" (*Epistles of John*, 126).

Having drawn a connection between one's hope for the future and one's life in the present (2:28), John then briefly draws an association between one's life in the present and an event in one's past (2:29). He appeals to what they know, and what they know is that **"He [God the Father] is righteous"** (2:29). That He is "righteous" means that everything He says or does corresponds with perfect justice. Having reminded them of this, John then draws a logical inference: **"everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him"** (2:29). To "practice righteousness" refers to a generally consistent pattern of life in words, attitudes, and actions that approximates God's character of perfect justice. Such people, John says, demonstrate that they have been **"born of Him"** (2:29). Their present-day manifestation of godliness gives proof that they are *children* of the God who Himself is pure righteousness. In other words, *practicing righteousness* is a definite sign of something *antecedent*—both logically and chronologically. Displaying God-honoring words, attitudes, and actions demonstrate that such a person has God's "family traits." Like Father, like children. (For more on this theme, see John 1:12–13; 3:3–8; 1 John 3:9.)

Thus, in 2:28–29, John describes the *pathway* to greater assurance. This pathway runs in two directions. **It is solidly futuristic in nature (the focus of v. 28)**. It looks forward and derives confidence from a hope of what lies ahead. This hope of standing with confidence before the judgment seat of Christ serves as powerful motivation to live appropriately in the present. **It is also rooted in history (the focus of v. 29)**. It looks back and derives confidence from remembering a definitive act of God in the past. The reminder that true, righteous living in the present can only take place because of a sovereign act of divine regeneration brings great encouragement.

II. The Reason for Assurance (3:1)

Now John advances the theme of divine regeneration in one of the most beautiful verses of the Bible: **"See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are"** (3:1a). Overwhelmed by the amazing nature of this grace to become one of God's children, John invites his readers to **"See!"** The language is more of an exclamation than a command. He wants his readers to *take time to contemplate; to let this truth sink in*. John wants his readers to contemplate **"how great a love."** The phrase communicates John's extreme sense of astonishment. Unworthy sinners like John (and his audience) have been made children of God (2:29; see also John 1:12–13) by an act of overwhelming *love*. This love is not momentary. It does not wax and wane. Instead, **"the Father has bestowed"** it on us in a decisive, once-for-all act by which He takes infidels and makes them His own forever. In response to such a truth, John concludes with another exclamatory statement: **"And we are!"**

As somewhat of an aside, John then explains why this truth still results in hardship in this present work: **"For this reason"** (3:1b). Because of God's sovereign, gracious act of making us His children, **"the world does not know us."** Simply stated, unbelievers cannot understand believers. They are of different families. They don't share the same characteristics. As such, unbelievers will naturally treat believers with ridicule and scorn. But John does not want his readers to be surprised. There is a reason for this, and the reason is that the world also did not **"know Him"**—that is, Christ (see John 1:10–11). Not able to recognize Christ, the world is unable to recognize the "family resemblance" believers have with Him. As R. C. H. Lenski states, "The mystery of regeneration is foolishness in its eyes; those who are children of God in Christ it considers deluded."

Ultimately, whether looking to the future and the confidence we can have at the appearance of Christ, or to the past and the cause of our ability to abide in Christ and practice righteousness, the assurance that can be drawn from these perspectives is rooted fundamentally in *the love of God*.

III. The Promotion of Assurance (3:2–3)

In 1 John 3:2–3, John returns to the topic he raised back in 2:28—*the appearance of Christ*. John addresses his readers as **“beloved”** (3:2), a title certainly appropriate in light of what he just stated in 3:1. John then describes his audience—including himself—as **“children of God”** (3:2), a description reflecting his words in 2:29 and 3:1. John writes these two designations to provide his readers with powerful encouragement, to say, “we enjoy this status *already*! We can have confidence in God *now*!”

But the best is yet to come. John writes, **“it has not appeared as yet what we will be”** (3:2). Whatever joy the believer can take from his present status is *minor* compared to what he will experience in the future. In fact, what the believer possesses now is but a shadow of the reality that is to come. As R. C. H. Lenski states, ““A child of God is here and now, indeed, like a diamond that is crystal white within but is still uncut and shows no brilliant flashes from reflecting facets.” What is that future? **“We will be like Him”**—that is, like Christ. And what brings about that monumental transformation? **“We will see Him just as He is”** (3:2).

Every genuine believer *longs* for this day. As John Owen stated, “This immediate sight of Christ is that which all the saints of God in this life do breathe and pant after” (*Works*, 1.379). This is true “heavenly-mindedness” (see Col 3:1–4). To yearn for this blessed moment when faith will be turned to sight and our eyes will behold the face of our Savior is what it means to “love His appearing” (see 2 Tim 4:8). And the more that we cultivate this longing, the more motivation we will have for living purely in all our responsibilities in the present, for **“everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure”** (3:3).

For Discussion

1. How many times in the last week have you thought about the appearance of Christ? When you do, does the thought of being taken from this world and appearing before Him bring joy and anticipation, or reluctance and shame? Explain why is this so?
2. Re-read 1 John 2:28. What are the things you wish you could express confidently when you appear before Christ and give an account of your life? Make a list, and then consider what things need to change in your life right now so that you could achieve this desire.
3. Someone has said, “Believers can become so heavenly-minded that they are no longer of any earthly good.” What misunderstandings about heavenly-mindedness make this happen? How does a believer avoid these pitfalls?
4. Are you rationally and emotionally moved by the truth of 1 John 3:1a? Does the love of God for you still cause you to wonder and sing like you did when you were first saved?
5. When you think of future glory, is the thought of seeing Christ face-to-face what most captures your desires?

For Further Study

1. **Memorize** 1 John 3:1–3.
2. **Sing** “The Love of God” (*Hymns of Grace*, #91) and “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us” (*Hymns of Grace*, #80).
3. **Meditate upon** Colossians 3:1–4. Prayerfully consider how this text instructs you about your focus in life.
4. **Read** this article by John MacArthur: “Is Christ’s Return Imminent,” accessible through Grace to You at: <https://www.gty.org/articles/A368/is-christs-return-imminent>.
5. **Listen to** the sermon by John MacArthur entitled, “A Theology of Hope,” preached January 5, 2003, and accessible through Grace to You at: <https://www.gty.org/sermons/62-21/a-theology-of-hope>.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: January 14, 7pm – “Assurance and the Practice of Righteousness” (Brad Klassen)