

For many Christians, the assurance of salvation seems like an elusive treasure, something too good to be true. Fearful of the dangers of self-deception or self-confidence, they resign themselves to a life of doubt, never able with confidence to answer the question, “Do you have eternal life?”

Some go even further, suggesting that God intends the Christian life to be this way—a life of constant doubt. The fear of not being saved is considered a healthy motivation for the Christian to keep fleeing from the world and pursuing Christ. For them, assurance becomes little more than a carrot on a stick, always just out of reach—for good reason.

But this was not the apostle John’s conviction. In response to a dangerous movement which sought to spread confusion among the Christians of his day by promoting an esoteric way of salvation, John wrote 1 John with the intent to quell doubts and establish confidence. His overall intent is summarized succinctly in 1 John 5:13, “**These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.**” John wrote to his readers as one convinced of the authenticity of their faith, as one confident in their good standing with God, and as one concerned that they be able to distinguish objectively between true faith and the counterfeit faith espoused by false teachers. Robert Law summarizes John’s effort well when he writes,

With St. John the grounds of assurance are ethical, not emotional; objective, not subjective; plain and tangible, not microscopic and elusive. They are three, or rather, they are a trinity: Belief, Righteousness, Love. By his belief in Christ, his keeping God’s commandments, and his love to his brethren, a Christian man is recognized and recognizes himself as begotten of God. (*The Tests of Life*, 297)

Every part of John’s letter contributes to his purpose statement. The sections covered so far in this study can be summarized as follows:

- **1 John 1:1–4** – “Assurance and the Historicity of Christ” – *Do you believe that the biblical testimony about Jesus Christ is true?*
- **1 John 1:5–10** – “Assurance and the Confession of Sin” – *Are you deeply aware of your sin and do you acknowledge it to God?*
- **1 John 2:1–2** – “Assurance and the Sufficiency of Christ” – *Do you believe that the sacrifice of Christ is sufficient for your sin?*
- **1 John 2:3–6** – “Assurance and the Obedience of God’s Commands” – *Are you zealous to obey God’s revealed will for your life?*
- **1 John 2:7–11** – “Assurance and the Love of One’s Brother” – *Do you give yourself sacrificially for the benefit of other believers?*
- **1 John 2:12–17** – “Assurance and the Hatred of Evil” – *Do you loathe the things that are contrary to God and His ways?*
- **1 John 2:18–27** – “Assurance and the Persistence in Truth” – *Do you hunger for and persist in the truth of God’s Word?*
- **1 John 2:28–3:3** – “Assurance and the Anticipation of Glory” – *Does your longing for Christ’s return influence your life today?*
- **1 John 3:4–10** – “Assurance and the Practice of Righteousness” – *Are you convinced that sin is utterly inconsistent with your new life?*
- **1 John 3:11–24** – “Assurance and the Lifestyle of Love” – *Are you convinced that love is absolutely essential to your new life?*
- **1 John 4:1–6** – “Assurance and the Discernment of Error” – *Do you care about the truth and are you growing in discernment?*
- **1 John 4:7–10** – “Assurance and the Primacy of God’s Love” – *Does your love for others flow from an awe over God’s love for you?*

- **1 John 4:11–14** – “Assurance and the Reflection of God’s Love” – *Do you feel compelled to love others because of God’s love for you?*
- **1 John 4:15–21** – “Assurance and the Experience of God’s Love” – *Are you astonished by God’s love for you as shown through Christ?*
- **1 John 5:1–5** – “Assurance and the Triumph of Faith” – *Is your faith in Jesus Christ producing increasing victory over sin?*
- **1 John 5:6–12** – “Assurance and the Reception of God’s Word” – *Do you accept the apostolic testimony of the person & work of Christ?*
- **1 John 5:13–17** – “Assurance and the Success of Prayer” – *Do you believe God listens to and answers your prayers?*

John assumed that his readers would answer all these questions in the affirmative, and as such, would grow in their personal assurance. Moreover, by emphasizing these themes as he does, John provides his readers with the criteria by which to distinguish true faith—their faith—from counterfeit faith—the faith of those who “went out from us, but were not really of us” (2:19).

1 John 5:18–21 – “Assurance and the Effects of Regeneration”

To conclude his letter, the apostle John now writes,

We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in *the power of* the evil one. And we know 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, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, guard yourselves from idols. (1 John 5:18–21)

Once again, certainty is on John’s mind. He concludes the letter with *three absolute truths about life in God* (vv. 18–20) and *one final exhortation in light of this life* (v. 21).

I. Three Absolute Truths about the New Birth (5:18–20)

The structure of 5:18–20 is obvious. Each of the three sentences (v. 18, v. 19, and v. 20) begin with the same words: **“We know that.”** Thus, each of the three sentences serve as *assertions*—declarations of objective, absolute truth. In fact, John doesn’t only state “I know that” or “you know that.” His use of the **“we”** indicates that these truths are confessed by the apostles themselves and all genuine believers. In a way, these verses form a kind of early *apostolic creed*—a powerful way of declaring that true, saving faith is not a personal religion or mystical conviction, but is objective, historical, propositional, and transcendent.

Each of the three assertions also describes an effect of *regeneration*—the supernatural “new birth” or act of being “born again” (see John 3:3). What is regeneration? It is **“the divine impartation of eternal life into the spiritually dead sinner”** (MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 580). Furthermore, each assertion assumes the assertion that follows, as John reasons backwards from the outworking of salvation to its origin. In other words, the assertion of v. 18 is dependent upon the assertion found in v. 19, and the assertion of v. 19 is dependent upon the assertion found in v. 20. Together, the three assertions serve as a summary of the contents of the entire letter—and as a final blow against the secessionists who had departed from the church, invented their own way of “salvation,” and sowed seeds of confusion among those who remained in the church. Here are the three assertions:

ASSERTION #1: The new birth changes a person’s practice: “We know that no one who is born of God sins” (5:18a). Once again, John refers to the genuine Christian as the one **“born of God”**—a repeated theme in his Gospel as well as this letter (see John 1:12–13; 3:3–8; 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 5:1, 4). The description, of course, emphasizes God’s sovereignty in salvation, for no other analogy displays the monergistic nature of salvation as does the picture of birth.

John states that **“we know”** that no person who has experienced this birth **“sins.”** This present tense verb emphasizes *a continuous practice*. Constant sinning is what the spiritual dead man does. It only makes sense that the spiritually enlivened man will not live the same way that he did when he was dead (see 1 John 3:6, 9).

But is this first assertion contradictory to what John asserts elsewhere in the letter? For example, in 1 John 1:8 and 1:10, John emphasized that the denial of sin—whether committed in the present or the past—is outright heresy. He instead invites his readers to “confess their sins” (1:9) and reminds them of their righteous “Advocate” who intercedes on their behalf (2:1), and whose once-for-all propitiation is sufficient (2:2). He even mandates intercessory prayer for the “brother” who commits sin (5:16), indicating that this will be a reality in the Christian life. Ultimately, *sinless perfection* is not part of this life, but of the life to come (3:2).

So why this denial of sin in 5:18? John insists upon the fact that regeneration necessarily brings *practical transformation*. It never leaves the previously dead sinner in the same state of enslavement to and love for sin. Stated positively, John says, “We know that the one who is born of God is *liberated from sin!*”

John then gives the reason for this strong assertion: **“but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him” (5:18b)**. Some take **“He who was born of God”** as referring to the believer just described in the first half of the verse (e.g., KJV: “but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself”). But the verb **“was born/begotten”** is not expressed the same way as in the previous clause: “is born/begotten.” As such, a different referent is in view. Then of whom is John speaking? It is best to interpret it as a reference to **the Son of God—the “only begotten”** (4:9). In fact, the Nicene Creed uses the same expression in the Greek to describe Jesus Christ: “the one from the Father begotten before all ages.”

Thus, it is the only begotten of God who **“keeps”** those “born of God.” The verb used here speaks of a continuous keeping and explains why those who have been born again will never die again. This is the Son’s mission: to rebuff the effort of anyone—including the evil one—to snatch them from His hand (John 10:27–28; see also 2 Thess 3:3; Heb 7:24–25; 1 John 2:1). It is because of this that **“the evil one does not touch him.”** The “touch” that is pictured here is not that of distraction or temptation, but of causing *spiritual harm or destruction*. Thus, in addition to the promise of the Son’s preservation, those born of God are guaranteed ultimate protection from the Destroyer himself (Luke 22:31–32; 1 John 4:4).

ASSERTION #2: The new birth changes a person’s position: “We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (5:19). That **“we are of God”** describes a present, ongoing reality and points to our new *origin* and *identity*. In fact, the word order is emphatic; John literally states, **“of God we are!”** In other words, we belong to Him! We share in His life! We identify according to Him!

In contrast, **“the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.”** John sees the world in two dimensions: those who are of God, and those who are of the world order, marked by “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life” (2:16). That which is “in the evil one” is clearly not “of the Father” (2:16).

The conclusion is inescapable. Not only are we protected from the *destruction* of the evil one (v. 18b), but we are free from his *authority* as well. True, we do *struggle* against him (Eph 6:12). He is to us as a “roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8). But we do not *belong* to him. He has no authority *over us*.

ASSERTION #3: The new birth changes a person’s perception: “And we know 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, in His Son Jesus Christ” (5:19a, b). John asserts that the believer’s perception has changed in three areas:

- (1) **“That the Son of God has come”** – we now recognize the nature of the Son’s *incarnation* (He is both divine and human) and *mission* (1 John 4:9–10). Before the new birth, we thought it was foolishness (1 Cor 1:18).
- (2) **“That the Son of God . . . has given us understanding”** – we now recognize that He has *enlightened* our once-darkened minds and granted us comprehension of the true significance of His coming, through the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:27). This knowledge we embrace this is a *gift*, not as our own personal *achievement* (Matt 16:15–17). Moreover, we recognize the goal of this new understanding: **“so that you may know Him who is true.”** In other words, God graciously grants us the knowledge the world cannot know not merely to embrace historical/theological facts *about* Jesus, but to *know the only true God* (see John 17:3).

(3) **“That . . . we are in Him who is true”** – we now recognize that we have a new spiritual existence: that we *abide in God the Father* and that *He is our life* (1 John 2:27; 4:13, 15–16). However, this new existence does not happen apart from the exclusive Mediator. As John states, it is **“in [by] His Son Jesus Christ.”** Abiding in God is experienced only through the mediation of Jesus Christ as the propitiation for our sins (1 John 1:7; 2:2; 4:9–10) and as our Advocate (2:1). See John 14:6.

John concludes this final assertion with an unequivocal affirmation of the deity of Jesus Christ: **“This is the true God and eternal life” (5:19c)**. Thus, John ends with the same focus with which he began—*the exclusivity of Jesus Christ and the life He gives* (see 1 John 1:1–3, “. . . the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us . . .”). As Rudolf Schnackenburg poignantly states,

For here the full identity of Jesus with God is recognized without reserve. . . . This seems to occur intentionally at the end of the letter, at the climax of the triumphant expression of faith. It is hardly an accident that it is precisely from the beginning (1:1, 18) and the end (20:28) of [the Gospel of] John that the light of Jesus’ divinity shines forth most fully. The climactic Christological confession becomes visible here in all its clarity. (*The Johannine Epistles*, 263).

II. One Final Exhortation in Light of the New Birth (5:21)

To close his letter, John gives a crucial exhortation that summarizes his fundamental concern for his readers: **“Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (5:21)**. As noted several times already, his description of them as **“little children”** is not disparaging; the address implies affection, authority, and affirmation (also 2:1, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4). His call is to **“guard yourselves.”** The idea of the verb here is “to protect by taking careful measures,” and the way in which John expresses this command emphasizes urgency and totality. There is no room for error. The guarantee of the Lord’s protection from the evil one (v. 18) does not negate the need for our own vigilant and unceasing defensiveness. We must apply all the necessary means.

That from which we are to guard ourselves are **“idols.”** In John’s day, the cities were filled with pagan temples, altars, and idols. To add to this, Emperor Domitian demanded worship as “god.” But John is not necessarily warning of the Greco-Roman pantheon of gods or of the emperor cult. Most importantly, he is warning of *false Christs*. Those who had seceded from the church (2:19) promoted a different Christ and a different way of salvation (e.g., 2:18, 23; 4:1–5). They had rejected the apostolic testimony concerning the nature of Jesus Christ and His works, and in response, created a version of their own. To John, this was nothing less than *idolatry*—the fashioning of a god, a savior, who was nothing more than a representation of the sinner himself.

For John, this was the clear and present danger. To give in just a little demeans the glorious person and work of Jesus Christ, and as a consequence, undermines the possibility of assurance of salvation. To state this exhortation positively, “Little children, cling to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Accept no substitutes!”

For Discussion

1. How can you explain John’s language that the born-again believer does not sin (5:18) in light of his language earlier in the letter that to deny sin is heresy (see 1:8, 10), that we are to confess our sins (1:9), that we have an Advocate when we do sin (2:1), and that we are to pray for the sinning brother (5:16)?
2. Some claim that Christians can be “demon possessed.” How can you use 1 John 5:18–19 to refute that claim?
3. John makes an explicit, climactic declaration of the deity of Jesus Christ at the end of 1 John 5:20. Why is a right Christology (the doctrine of Christ) so foundational to the assurance of salvation.
4. What are some biblical means we can employ in order to “guard yourself from idols” (false Christs)? Are you applying these means in your life right now? How can you improve on this?

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw. Men of the Word will resume with a new series in early September.