

“ASSURANCE AND THE STAGES OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE”

In the previous sections of this letter, John set forth two tests of true Christianity: the test of obedience and the test of love. In our text today, we have a brief digression before John moves on to his third test. John has said some challenging things up to this point in his letter, but he does not want the Christians to whom he is writing to be discouraged or to have doubts about their salvation. So he takes a few verses to assure them about their standing with the Lord. In these verses he addresses believers in three distinct groups: “children,” “fathers,” and “young men.” He is not so much talking about physical maturity as he is talking about spiritual maturity, although there can be significant overlap between the two. By “little children” John means Christians who are young in the faith. By “young men” he means Christians who are somewhat more mature and are fully engaged in the life of Christian warfare. And by “fathers” he means Christians who are seasoned and proven in the faith. By the way, even though John uses masculine nouns here he is not just talking about men. Christian women certainly fall into these categories as well. All Christians fall into one of these three groups.

These verses show us that there are stages in the Christian life, just as there are stages to life in general. John Newton, the 18th century hymn-writer and slave-trader-turned-minister of the gospel, wrote about this topic in several of his letters, which I will quote at several points in this sermon. As we study this passage today, we will see the apostle John addressing Christians according to their varying degrees of spiritual maturity. And while he addresses them separately, his purpose for each group is the same. He wants to

reassure these believers and stir up their confidence in their standing with God. Thus we can say that this passage is about Christian assurance through the various stages of the Christian life.

The first group to be addressed is the “little children,” the youngsters and newcomers in the faith. To these Christians John says “your sins are forgiven for his name’s sake.” Forgiveness of sins is the most fundamental aspect of the Christian faith, because it is our most fundamental need. In our flesh we are all lawbreakers, and the curse of the law is upon us. Before we come to Christ we are dead in our trespasses and sins; we are slaves to sin; we are objects of God’s wrath. But when we place our trust in Christ, we are washed; we are sanctified; we are justified in his name.

John says that our sins are forgiven “for [Christ’s] name’s sake.” This phrase reminds us that salvation is found in Christ alone. The only way God will forgive a person’s sins is if that person places their faith in Jesus Christ. As the apostles Peter and John declared before the Jewish ruling council in the book of Acts,

“This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” [4:11-12]

Jesus is God’s only provision for the forgiveness of his people’s sins. There is salvation in no one else. Having your sins forgiven for Christ’s name’s sake means having them

forgiven on account of Christ's perfect righteousness and substitutionary death. John spoke of this earlier in this letter when he said that Jesus "is the propitiation for our sins." Jesus has turned God's wrath away from us by enduring that wrath on the cross. This is what makes forgiveness possible.

The other thing that John says to the "children" in the faith is this: "you know the Father." This is another fundamental of the Christian faith. Along with the peace of knowing that his sins are forgiven, the young believer has the joy of knowing that he has been adopted into God's family. He has come to know the one true God, the God who created all things and who rules the world with perfect wisdom and power, as his Father. And the knowledge of this new relationship often produces considerable spiritual zeal in the young Christian. As John Newton puts it,

"It is spring-time with [the new Christian]; he is in bloom, and, by the grace and blessing of the heavenly husbandman, will bear fruit in old age. His faith is weak, but his heart is warm...His knowledge is but small, but it is growing every day." [*Letters*, 17]

Forgiveness of sins and adoption into God's family are the most basic and treasured elements of the Christian faith. They bring joy and comfort to new Christians when they first come to faith and to covenant children as they are nurtured towards a mature profession of faith. To know that all of your sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, to know

that God is your Father - these are the things that form the basis of all Christian hope and assurance.

Although the next group that John addresses is the “fathers,” I will deal now with the next group in terms of level of maturity: the “young men.” These are the Christians who have advanced a bit in the faith. They are past the initial enthusiasm and wonder that tends to accompany young faith and are now engaged in the daily battle of Christian living. As Newton puts it, “now [that] faith is stronger, it has more to grapple with.” [19] John describes these believers as those who “have overcome the evil one.” This does not mean that they have attained a definitive victory over sin and temptation, but they have begun to experience victory over them. Here is a reminder that being a Christian is not just about having your sins forgiven; it is also about experiencing deliverance from the tyrannical power of sin in your day to day life. Justification needs to be followed by sanctification. John has seen this happening in the lives of the “young men” in these churches. They were overcoming the evil one. And he wants them to know that they can have assurance of their standing with God because they have experienced his transforming power firsthand, as “their conflict [with sin] has become a conquest.” [Stott, 102]

In the second half of our passage, John says two more things about these “young men.” He says, “you are strong, and the word of God abides in you.” These things are closely related to each other. The way Christians become strong in the faith is by having the Word of God abiding within us. It is the Word that enables us to overcome the evil

one. As the psalmist writes, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word...I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you." [Psalm 119:9, 11] God's Word is our source of victory in the Christian life.

Perhaps you have wondered why we have to keep on fighting against sin and temptation after we become Christians. Why doesn't God just perfect us immediately? Why do we have to continue struggling with sin? Here again Newton provides good insight, as he writes,

"[God] would not [permit] sin to remain in [his children], if he did not purpose to over-rule it, for the fuller manifestation of the glory of his grace and wisdom, and for the making of his salvation more precious to their souls." [19-20]

Think about what takes place as we engage in the battle against sin and temptation. We become more and more aware of the deceitfulness and wickedness of our hearts. And this causes us to be more and more amazed at God's grace in saving us, as well as more and more dependent upon him as we continue to struggle against temptation. The Lord works through our lifelong battle with sin to cause us to be increasingly distrustful of ourselves so that we might place our entire trust in Christ alone.

The third group that John addresses in these verses is the "fathers," those Christians who are well-advanced in the faith. These are the believers whose profession of faith has been confirmed by their longer experience of God's grace. In one sense, such believers

are not any stronger than those who are less mature in the faith. However, as Newton observes, a Christian at this advanced stage of the Christian life is stronger in the sense that he has a

“constant sense of his own weakness...His heart has deceived him so often, that he is now in a good measure weaned from trusting to it...And having found again and again the vanity of all other helps, he is now taught to go to the Lord at once for ‘grace to help in time of need.’ Thus he is strong, not in himself, but in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” [Newton, 23-24]

Newton's point is well-made. A person does not become a father or mother in the faith by trusting in their own strength. Rather, spiritual maturity is cultivated as we become increasingly aware of our utter dependence upon the Lord.

While John describes the children and young men slightly differently in the second half of the passage, he says the exact same thing about the fathers. Both times he says “you know him who is from the beginning.” John wants to emphasize the fact that the God whom these advanced Christians know is the eternal God. He wants them to take to heart the fact that, while we change with age, God does not change. This is a basic truth, but it is one that can provide older believers with great security and peace. Our bodies grow weak. We all eventually die. But the God we know and love is the One who is

from the beginning. We can rest secure in this God, because he is the One who was, and who is, and who is to come.

John's words of encouragement to fathers in the faith take into account the fact that these believers have been fighting the good fight of faith for some time. The fact that they will not have to keep on fighting forever is becoming more and more of a reality to them. It will not be too long before faith becomes sight for them. As Newton puts it,

“Happy [man]! his toils, sufferings, and exercises, will soon be at an end; soon his desires will be accomplished; and he who has loved him, and redeemed him with his own blood, will receive him to himself, with a ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.’” [28]

This is the comfort that John extends to fathers and mothers in the faith. He wants them to know that their lives are secure in the hands of the Ancient of Days.

Now that we have looked at these three groups individually, I want to point out two general applications that we can draw from these verses. First of all, I want to call your attention to the fact that, even though these verses acknowledge that there are different stages in the Christian life, John did not write a separate letter to each of these groups. He did not write one letter to the youth group, another letter to the young singles, another letter to the parents of teenagers, and another letter to the retirees in the congregation. He wrote this one letter to all of the believers in these churches. And he expected all of them

to benefit from what he wrote. He addressed this letter, which contains words like 'propitiation' and 'antichrist,' to believers at all of the various stages in the Christian life. The reason why I point this out is because it is something that runs contrary to a tendency that is becoming more and more prevalent in the church today. Theologian Michael Horton describes this tendency as "ecclesial apartheid," an approach that

"is expanding, as each generation and demographic market is treated to its own study Bibles and devotional materials, small groups, and 'worship experiences.' ... Today it is quite possible for people entering college to have been raised in churches where they have never really been a part of the public services on the Lord's Day. Esconced in their niche programs, from 'children's church' to youth services, it is no wonder that more than half are reportedly unchurched by their sophomore year in college. Instead of regarding them as having abandoned church, we might perhaps wonder if they were ever fully a part of one." [*People and Place*, 205, 206]

Ecclesial apartheid may be popular in the church today, but you can be certain that the apostle John would not have been a proponent of this approach to ministry.

The second point of application has to do with the reason why John took this digression to address these three different groups by name in these verses. John Calvin suggests that the apostle's purpose in doing this was to counter our tendency to think that

what is addressed to all Christians in general does not apply to us in our particular circumstances. Here are Calvin's own words on this:

“[F]ew think that what is directed to all belongs to themselves. The old for the most part steal away as if they had exceeded the age of learning. Children refuse to hear, as if they were not yet old enough. Middle-aged men do not attend, because they are preoccupied with other cares.”

These words reflect tremendous insight into the human heart. We are so susceptible to thinking that the Word of God is not relevant to us. It is one of the ways in which our deceitful hearts try to get us to evade what God has to say to us in his Word. But here in this passage we see John naming us at our various levels of spiritual maturity and telling us that he is writing to us. This is God's Word to you. The entire Bible is God's Word to you. The Lord knows what stage you are at in the Christian life. And in his Word he provides you with just the encouragement that you need to continue walking in his light and growing in his grace.