

I John 2:12-14

¹²I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

¹³I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.

¹⁴I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.

HOPE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Introduction;

To my delight, my children still encourage me to read to them, especially fantasy – where rabbits are more like old English Colonels, mice become warriors and elves slay orcs.

For some reason or another, books in this genre often include poetry or songs. These poems give writers more opportunity to add texture to the story and readers an opportunity to skip a page when the listeners aren't paying attention.

I confess - when I come across something that looks like it is written in meter, I brush over it quickly – in order to get to the good stuff. This – of course – is because I haven't recognized that the good stuff is often given to the slow.

Pondering Psalm 119 has begun a reversal of this trend; and I was delightfully surprised when I came across this oasis in 1 John. I did what the reader intended; I stopped, paid attention, and was rewarded with **assurance**. For that is, what it seems, to be providing; assurance to believers that they have much reason for confidence.

John is writing to the congregations across Asia Minor (now Turkey), probably in the late first century, in order to talk to them about the Christian life. He is concerned, in this book, for those who know the Triune God, those who have a personal and corporate fellowship with Him, that they will express that fellowship in various ways in their lives. Those lives, having been defined by a God who loves them, will be recognized by their love for one another.

This is important so that they know what kind of fruit they will produce, and also so that they might recognize those who call themselves Christians, but still live in darkness.

Perhaps John remembers Jesus' warning in Matthew 7

¹⁵"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶By their fruit you will recognize them.

He goes on:

Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

The fruit that God's people bear is love – and this is how you identify your identity in Christ. And if there is a seed of love, you are His. And if you are His, you need to know something:

And this is where we arrive in this verse – John seems to put on the brakes - as if to say to himself; "before I go on and tell them what not to do, I need them to know something important – something pivotal. They need assurance."

It sets the same tone that we see in the Lord's Prayer- before we get to "daily bread" and "forgive us our sins," we begin with "Our Father," a father who is ready to help us in our time of need; a reminder – "God loves you, your sins are forgiven, you know him, and the battle is already won."

He sets the pace in chapter 1 when he gives reason for writing;

I am writing to you;

- So that you too might have fellowship with us (v1:3)
- so that your joy may be complete. (v1:4)
- So that you may not sin (v2:1)
- So that we may recognize those who would deceive us. (v8).

So he is writing to the church about living with a Triune God with corporate fellowship, joy, righteousness and protection; these are good foundations for our life-walk with Christ.

Now as far as I know, John is an experienced apostle, having already lived a long life. Experience has told him that he needs to speak gently to his sheep...the medium is as much the message as the message itself. So in this book, he first tells them [his sheep] what he is about to tell them – tells them what they need to hear – then tells them what he just told them. And prior to any correction; a foundation of gentleness and assurance.

Assurance

SO we come to this oasis; as if John is saying, “I am writing to you not because you are sick, but because you are well.”

Words of assurance; let’s meditate on how well you are.

Though he is talking to the whole church, he styles this as if it is directed to Children, Young Men, and Fathers. We see this also in the fifth commandment as well as Psalm 119. Just as Mother and Father in the fifth commandment communicates to superiors, inferiors and equals, we see children, young men and fathers to mean something more.

So in this unique pause in scripture, we see him talking to the whole church, but he picks constituent parts of it in order to give assurance of salvation.

CHILDREN

John uses the words “little children,” or “dear children,” often to refer to all Christians. But here he seems to be talking to new Christians; not those who are chronologically younger rather those who are young in the faith.

These children in the faith also, in some way, represent the future; perhaps not the future of Christianity, but those who are embarking on a long journey of knowing. They know the father and are also coming to know him better. These words aid them in establishing an inductive form of reasoning as to what they will be learning in the future. Or at least, who they will know and who will never leave them.

Mr. Johnson preached from the gospel of Mark on Sunday – and made the statement that the new disciples needed to follow Jesus to know Jesus, but he also made the comment – “but they did know him a little bit.” Certainly enough to follow... That struck a unique parallel (in God’s economy).

It is the same with these children; John says

¹²“I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name’s sake.”

Young children need to start with the basics; first – “your sins are forgiven.” This is basic knowledge – Christianity 101. It requires us to acknowledge – first God, then we are sinners and need God’s forgiveness. If one is to learn anything from an apostle, it needs to start with the basics.

*Jesus loves me! This I know,
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to Him belong;
They are weak, but He is strong.*

We often try to make this more complicated. We exhaust ourselves trying to come up with new and interesting ways towards converting people towards what we believe. Often, we do so in a way that expresses our own belief because in doing so, we try to do so on our own power. But here we are with the basics.

Do you acknowledge that God exists? Do you acknowledge that you have sinned against Him and need His forgiveness? God loves. God forgives his people.

Sometimes we are ashamed to speak these basic truths. But here we are reminded, “this is what we teach to children in the faith.” You are His. Your sins are forgiven.

*Jesus loves me! He will stay
Close beside me all the way;
Thou hast bled and died for me,
I will henceforth live for Thee.*

Why are your sins forgiven? “For His namesake.”

This is central to the entire passage because it shows the object of our assurance and it gives the reason for his forgiveness, which is not something in us. Simply put; God does forgiveness.

He pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight – not for something in us but for the sake of the righteous Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We didn’t earn it, it is not because we are different in some way than other people, and we are simply forgiven because of Christ. The basis for our forgiveness is outside of us and it is because of what God has done.

The person and work of a sinless savior, our Messiah who submitted to life under the law, to death on a cross and 3-days in a tomb, in which our penalty was given to him – His righteousness imputed to us. This is the basis for our assurance.

Then we go to vs. 13 and He expands this inductive lesson to children; he says,

^{13C} *“I write to you, children, because you know the Father.”*

When Jesus told the disciples to follow him, they – who were like children - followed him. They did so because His sheep recognize his voice.¹

John was certainly thinking of the father as the primary mover in this relationship – he later wrote in 1 John 4:19, “We love because he first loved us.”

And this is elementary Christianity; that God is God. We are His people, the sheep of his pasture. ²

Christians are forgiven, that they are forgiven for His namesake, and that they know the Father.

FATHERS

¹³I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

¹⁴I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

With the exception of the tense that John uses to describe himself writing, both instructions to the fathers of the church are the same. And verily, verily – we know when we hear something twice, it means – “pay attention.”

Fathers are the voice of experience, not necessarily “old men,” rather those Christians who have walked with Christ for a period of years and years. They have seen more time with their savior, through soft sands and rocky soil. They have been delivered from trouble time and time again, they have prayed for their daily bread – and consequently have seen these prayers answered time and time again. When they look back in their walk with God they have much reason to say – “relax – do not fear.” Why? Because their experience matches the promises. They not only have biblical knowledge of “do not fear,” but they have experiential knowledge – consequential knowledge.

But what does John say of them; “because you know him who is from the beginning.”

(In this passage) Knowing the father is mentioned 3 times both to children and fathers – in a way that tells us that this is essential to your Christian walk. So obviously, this is something very important for us to know about our walk with Christ – and glorifying his name. It is not – get to know him. It IS – You know him!

Now we hear evangelists asking, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” It is an excellent question, but often framed in such a way to communicate that the person they are talking to is the agent of their knowing – meaning that they are the pursuer in the relationship. But this is not so – because we know that God knew us even while we were being knitted in the womb.³ He pursued us even in our rebellion. Our knowing God comes from God’s knowing us.

God knows us, therefore we know him – not from anything we have done. We see this emphasized in the statement towards children; they know him – even if only a little bit.

¹ John 10:27

² Psalm 100:3

³ Jeremiah 1:5

But our knowledge can increase with increased familiarity with God over time...as we see in the escalation from “children” to “father.”

So three things gather to increase our knowing of the person of God, which leads to godliness:

1. God himself
2. Walking with God over time – and he dwells in you.
3. The word, which abides in you. (This takes us back to #1).

So we begin our walk by him knowing us. Because, we know him. Then as we walk, we know him a little more. And this is the battle – that we know him.

And we can know him a little more by nurturing the word in us. And this is what the fathers have done, having walked with God for a time, they are closing the completion of their work, which is really God’s work in them – and they know the father more than new Christians – if only a little. These are the ones who teach the children what they know of him.

These experienced Christians are very helpful to us because they have walked long with Christ. A retired pastor was in my office this week – telling me of a sermon he recently heard from a young pastor. He recognized very quickly that what he was hearing was flavored by youth and inexperience and he was able to offer gentle correction. As he put it; “we [old men] see things differently...different things drive us.”

So John tells us with repetition, to pay attention to our elders who see things that we do not, for the mere fact that they have walked with Christ longer. They have also seen God’s rescue time and time again...so when someone says, “don’t worry...” they understand.

Now we are not talking about some secret type of knowledge like that, which John was challenging here. There were people who claimed to have a special type of knowledge that the rest of us mortals do not have – and that even the apostles did not have. These people, who were confusing the church, were going to “enlighten” the Christian church to the deeper things of the Christian life. But John says that these people are easy to identify because they do not love.

No, no – ALL Christians know the father. There are not super-Christians with capes – there is only fellowship with a God that you already know, and you can know him all the more as you walk from being a child towards being a father. The great discovery in our walk is that we already know him.

And this knowledge leads to godliness⁴, which rests in confident expectation of a God who never lies.

When I said that – did your heart acknowledge the truth in that statement? If I told you “God lied so that man would fall,” your ears would perk up instantly. Why? Because you know the father and you know that isn’t true. You know God. You have an intimate relationship with him. He dwells in you.

God dwells in children. God dwells in fathers. God dwells in young men.

⁴ Titus 1:1

YOUNG MEN

I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.

*I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.*

Young Men – I think represent something more than just “young Christians.” As Fathers represent the past – those who have experienced a long walk with Christ - and Children, the future – those who are beginning their journey or journeys to come, I think he is also talking about the present – those who are doing battle in the now – they are growing in grace.

John uses strong language – literally – “you are strong.” “You have overcome the evil one.” So we see in this present tense that the battle is already won.

Most of us do not feel that we have overcome the evil one – and certainly not 24/7. So - even though we know the father, we are less confident as we apply that knowledge to our own walk. We often feel defeated.

We have experienced deliverance not only from the penalty, but also from the power of sin. And so often we say, “But look, there’s this cluster of sins in my life that I’ve been fighting against for umpteen years! And I’m still fighting against them, and I don’t feel like I’m having dominion over them.” And John is saying, even those sins remind are a reminder that you have been liberated from the bondage of sin, because there was a time when you were in bondage to all sin – like the way you feel as if you are in bondage to this particular sin.

Before – you couldn’t even see your need for deliverance and you also did not know the father. But He came and lifted you out of bondage and saved you from the source of your sorrow – and His.

Not that you have yet experienced complete and utter deliverance from all your sins (that is saved for glory), but you have been saved from the punishment that those sins deserve and you have been saved from the power of those sins to rule your life. That is why you are strong – and that is why you have overcome the evil one.

And the word of God abides in you – that is how you have been made strong. It is the tool of knowing – the source of your strength.

How many times have you met with someone who was discouraged because they could only see that part of their life that was wrecked – and yet when you looked at them, you saw someone who was pretty much OK – even delightful. Yet, for that person, that miniscule dark part of their life was all they could see - they couldn’t get past it. To those people; John is speaking to you.

Just as, in that moment, you could see more of that person than they could see – John is doing the same. He addresses the whole person – not in the way the world does... “you are special just like everyone else... - you are good enough, smart enough and people like you...” No, he is addressing the new man in you that you cannot shake loose – you are a new creation – defined by God’s love for you, not your failing love for God.

He is addressing the person who is whole because Christ dwells in you. That wrecked portion is not the whole person...it is part of the person. It is a wound that is being healed. It might be the only part of you that you are paying attention to, but in reality, it is a minute portion of who you are. If you are

discouraged by that little-portion of your experience, then John is exhorting you to stop looking at yourself – or at least that part of yourself that is defeated. That is not who you are. You are not defined by your mistakes. You are defined by a God who loves you and gave his son for you. He knows you and made you worthy to receive him.

Go back to your first lesson: Children – your sins are forgiven. You know the father.

Did you know that when you dwell on your sins that you are calling God a liar? He said, “Cheer yourself. I have already dealt with that. And I gave it before you asked. Rise up and walk confidently, boldly – with joy and laughter.”

But I don’t want to dismiss the serious nature of sin, only the serious God who is bigger than your sin. The liberation that he gives you doesn’t mean you coast your way home to heaven, but that you have been saved into a fight. We are at war and we are fighting a strong enemy, the flesh and the devil.

But the fact that you hate the sin is sign of spiritual life. Dead people cannot fight sin. They are slaves to it.

Doctrine: Simply put; this verse is summed with the statement; Be assured. Your sins have been forgiven, you know the father, and the battle is won.

This is a word of assurance from one of your fathers, the apostle John. He has lived a long life and he is looking back, looking back at his discouragements, looking back at the battles he has fought – and he has seen the victor. Christ has won. It is finished.

So here he is; encouraging the little ones, the strong ones, the experienced ones; the same message to their different points of view.

Are you a child? Are you a young one? Are you a father or mother in Christ? You are here aren’t you?

If there is a sliver of Hope in your heart, look at the God who put it there. Then fan the flames the gift of God. For we do not worship a “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.”⁵

And be encouraged. You know Him.

⁵ 2 Timothy 1:5,6