

Life in the Son - 1 John 5

Date: 28 January 2024

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Series: All You Need is Love - 1 John

Texts: 1 John 5 (John 1.32-34, 14.13-14, 17.25-26, 20.30-31)

What are some of the big questions you have about the Christian faith? Maybe you have intellectual questions, say, about the Trinity or God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Maybe you have more personal and experiential questions, say about suffering, or prayer, or how to overcome sin, or whether God even loves you. Maybe you're exploring Christianity and you've got questions not just about Christianity but how do you know it's true. Actually that's not just a question for those exploring faith, it's a question for believers too. When I was in my twenties that was my question. I'd grown up as a Christian. My parents were missionaries. I'd been taught the Bible since I was a kid. But at university I was asking lots of questions about my faith and one of the big ones was how can I know Christianity is true? The Bible says all sorts of amazing things about Jesus, that he is God come in the flesh, that he died for our sins, that he rose again, that he ascended to heaven, that he's coming back as judge to fix this world and make all things new. How could I know it was true? That question was one of the reasons I decided to do a theology degree - because I wanted answers.

This is our final sermon on 1 John, this letter written by the apostle John at the end of his life. And it's not so much a letter as a sermon, or even a primer on Christianity. John writes to tell his first readers and us what the essentials of the Christian faith are so that we won't get led astray by false teaching and so that we can know that we are Christians. He wants us to know God's love and to have confidence in our faith. In verse 13 of chapter 5 he says,

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.

Last week Al suggested the letter is like a croissant. I'm not going to push the analogy, but John does circle around his main themes. This is what John says it is to be a Christian: to believe in the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another.¹ That is our response to the God who is love and who loved us by sending his Son Jesus to die for us. In this final chapter John circles back to these themes. He answers that question of how we can know all this stuff about Jesus is true. But he begins the chapter by looking at faith in action.

Overcoming the World (Obedience) 1-5

Have a read with me from verse 1:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. **2** This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. **3** In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands.

¹ 1 John 3.23

Jesus said that the entire Old Testament can be summed up in these two commands: Love God, and love your neighbour.² Here John fleshes that out a little. How do you love God? By believing in his Son Jesus. If you love the Father, you'll love his Son. That love for the Son flows seamlessly into love for his brothers and sisters, the church. John as he always does echoes Jesus' own teaching - this is how you love God, you obey his commands. And his command is this: love one another.

Anyone who has ever tried to put this command into practice knows it's incredibly difficult. Other people are just so annoying! They do all sorts of things that I don't like. They place so many demands upon me. They ask so much. They are so hard to understand. They take so much time. And, if I'm being honest, I'm more than just a little bit selfish.

But John continues with an astonishing statement:

And [God's] commands are not burdensome,

What? Not burdensome? How?

4 for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. 5 Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

What does John mean by this? Some Christians talk about living in victory. Well the victory that John has in mind is overcoming the world - that is humanity set against God and his ways. It's so easy just to go along with the crowd, to not love God, to not obey his commands, especially the ones that are unfashionable. It's so easy to not love one another but to be selfish. How do we overcome that? We believe that Jesus is the Son of God. That is to say, Jesus is the only one who has perfectly resisted the world, the flesh and the devil. He is the one who said in Gethsemane, "not my will but yours be done". His obedience, even to death, was the great victory over the world and its prince. What's more, his victory is also the great demonstration of his love for us that moves us to love in return.

It's not that our faith is victorious. It's that we have faith in the one who is victorious. As we trust him, so we can participate in his victory over the world by the power of the Holy Spirit whom he has given us, and so live the life of love for which we're made. And so we also share in Jesus' garden prayer. It's there in the prayer Jesus taught us - to every day pray, when we're confronted with the world or the flesh to pray, "Our Father, hallowed be your name, your will be done on earth, in my life, right now."

Testimony to the Son (Faith) 6-12

But how do we know that Jesus really is the Son of God, come into the world, to die for our sins? If that is a prayer of faith to share in his victory, upon what basis do we place our faith? At the start of his letter, John says that he himself saw and heard and touched Jesus. "We proclaim to you what we

² Matthew 22.37-40

have seen and heard.”³ The Christian faith has from the very first been based upon the eyewitness testimony of the apostles. This is recorded for us in the pages of the New Testament.

As Christians we believe that the Bible is God’s Word, because it tells us it is. But that raises the question. Why should I trust the Bible? The standard answer I heard when I was asking these questions in my 20s was, “because the Bible is historically reliable.” Now I’m convinced this is a true statement, and if you’re interested I can suggest some books which explore the historical reliability of the Bible, but it is complicated. And most of us have neither the time nor the training to really come to grips with all the historical complexities that lie behind this question. As I pursued that question of, how can I know, I came across a *theological* problem with the historically reliable line of answer. The problem is this: If I have as the basis for my faith the historical reliability of the Bible, then my faith is not actually in God at that point, but in people, their research and arguments. But this would make God dependent upon us as humans which is a contradiction. We are dependent upon God, not he upon us. Or, put in reverse, if God were dependent upon us, then he wouldn’t be God, and the 19th century atheist Ludwig Feuerbach’s critique of Christianity would be right. Namely that we make God in our own image.

Well I should have read 1 John, because raises this question in positive form in verse 9:

We accept human testimony, but God’s testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son.

Where do we find God’s testimony about his Son? John tells us in verses 6-12. Have a read with me.

This is the one who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. **7** For there are three that testify: **8** the [a] Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.

Now, I should say, these are the most difficult verses in 1 John to understand, and commentators ancient and modern are divided as to what they mean. I’m going to give you what I think is the best. When John says that Jesus came by water and blood he is referring firstly to Jesus’ baptism and crucifixion.⁴ In his Gospel Jesus’ baptism and crucifixion are moments where Jesus’ identity is revealed, with God the Father himself testifying to this.

But I’m convinced John has a secondary present meaning in mind when he speaks about the testimony of the water and the blood, and that is to the sacraments - baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In Romans 6 we read that in baptism we’re united to Jesus, we participate in his death and resurrection.⁵ Jesus identifies with sinful humanity in his baptism, and in our baptism we are united to him as the redeemer of humanity. And in 1 Corinthians 10 we read that the cup of thanksgiving

³ 1 John 1:1-3

⁴ Cf. John 1.32-34, 12.27-33

⁵ Romans 6.3-7

(literally eucharist in Greek), is a participation in the blood of Christ.⁶ As Jesus' baptism and death were God's testimony to his Son, so as we receive baptism and the cup of the Lord, they are God's testimony to us in our present experience. I find the Anglican catechism very helpful at this point when it describes the sacraments as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us, ordained by Christ himself, as a means by which we receive that grace and as a tangible assurance that we do in fact receive it.⁷ That is to say, that Jesus' blood washes me clean from sin so that I am forgiven and made a child of God is as real as the water which was poured over my head. And, so I don't forget, and to remind me of his forgiveness, that Jesus, God the Son incarnate, died for me, is as real the bread I eat and the wine I drink.

The water and the blood, baptism and communion, are the outward visible testimony of the Father to me. And this is accompanied by the third, the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit. That is not to answer all our questions about knowing God, by no means! I don't expect we could come to the end of questioning the infinite God. But in the sacraments and the inner testimony of the Spirit, I place my faith not on human testimony, but the testimony of God to me. What's more, the sacraments are a testimony which is accessible to all, regardless of age, reading ability, or access to the Bible in your own language. What is that testimony? John tells us, verse 11

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. **12** Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

So for those of you who are Christians here and are wondering whether God loves you, or who are not sure if he can forgive you - come to his table. Jesus himself has given the bread and wine to assure you of his love and forgiveness. I know some of you struggle with intrusive thoughts that make it difficult for you to come to the table. Take heart - he has overcome the world and the devil. It's not that your faith is victorious. It's that you have faith in the one who is victorious. You wouldn't say, "I'm sick, so I can't take medicine", no our weakness and frailty is all the more reason to come and be nourished at his table.

For those of you who are here today and you know you're not a Christian or you're not sure. Hear God's word to you today -

God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. **12** Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Do you have the Son? Oh yes, being a Christian is all about living a life of love, but that comes from the life of the Son flowing through us. Without the Son, we don't have life. So will you receive the Son today? We have a prayer of confession coming up. Make that a moment when you can say sorry to God for living life your way, and to ask for his forgiveness, and to commit to living a life believing that Jesus is the Christ, God's king, your king. And then you are welcome to come to the table, and to receive those tokens of God's love for you.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 10.16

⁷ Cf. *To Be A Christian: An Anglican Catechism*, Crossway, 2020: 55-56

Ok, briefly 3 points in the final verses of 1 John.

First, John invites us to that most basic of Christian practice and our greatest privilege - **Prayer** (13-17).

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. **15** And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him.

Through Jesus we have confidence to approach the Creator of the universe. The closer we come to Jesus, the more our prayers will line up with God’s will. So come to Jesus, and come to prayer. And notice what John immediately says to pray for - the brother or sister who sins, that God will lead them to the way of life. As Christians we’re called to pray for each other. It is the easiest and most powerful way we can love one another. Are you praying for your brothers and sisters, and not just for things like health concerns, but for their growth in godliness? I know I certainly need those prayers!

Second, **Protection** (18-20). John knows this world is not a safe place. We all face spiritual danger. In verse 19 he writes, “the whole world is under the control of the evil one.” But John wants us to know this: We are children of God. Jesus keeps us safe, and the evil one cannot harm us.⁸ That is not to say that we will not face sickness, or suffering or temptation or even death. But our lives are hidden in Christ. We are safe in him. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. Some years ago Claire’s aunt Faye died. She happened to know Colin Buchanan, and he sang this song at her funeral - “Be strong and courageous, the Lord of the ages, holds all his little ones safe by his side.” We need not fear anything in this world, for Jesus has conquered them all.

John’s final word is this: Dear children, **keep yourselves from idols.**⁹ In his day, there were the physical representations of false gods, but in every age we are tempted to worship counterfeit gods. Tim Keller defines an idol as, “anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.”¹⁰ That might be money, pleasure, relationships, career, intellect, music, sex, video games, anything that competes with God for our affection and allegiance. The solution? Come again to worship Jesus. In him we find we are infinitely loved, unshakably secure, eternally safe.

⁸ 1 John 5.18-19

⁹ 1 John 5.21

¹⁰ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex and Power and the Only Hope that Matters* (New York, Penguin: 2009)