

# First John Chapter Five

John closes his first epistle by returning to the theme of eternal **life** (cf.1.2) which is mentioned *seven* times in this chapter (x13 in epistle). The evidence for eternal life (those 'born of God') is provided in the form of a summary of John's three tests of fellowship (vv.1-5). This is followed by the divine witness to eternal life given in the Son, John using forms of the word *martus* (witness) *eleven* times in vv.6-12. The final section (vv.13-21) gives various assurances of eternal life, employing the word 'know' (using two different Greek words) *seven* times.

## The Evidence for Eternal Life [5.1-5]

**v.1:** The first evidence of having been 'born of God' is believing (continuing *and* persistent) that Jesus is the Christ. This is belief of the fact, though intimating an active personal commitment to the truth believed. Contrast 'believing on' (*eis*, v.10) which is *active* faith exercised *towards* and *in* the person of the Lord Jesus. 'Jesus is the Christ' identifies the man Jesus with the divine Christ (anointed one) – this same person is the Son of God (1.3; 2.22-23; 3.23; 5.5, 20). The second evidence of divine life is *continuing* love towards God (who gave us spiritual birth) and other believers who are also 'begotten of Him' and thus belong to the same spiritual family. *Hay: It is incongruous to a love a father and neglect his son (cf. 1 Kings 5.1).* **v.2:** John's rearranges his normal logic which generally emphasises the evidence of love *for God* (cf. 3.23, 4.20-21). Now he speaks of the proof of love *for God's children* – which is to love God and keep His commandments with diligent care. These are all interdependent links in John's circle of love – they cannot exist apart from one another. *Kruse: One cannot love God and keep his commands without loving the children of God, and one cannot love the children of God without loving God and keeping his commands.* **v.3:** Third, the child's love for God is expressed in a moral and practical commitment to read and obey His word – and this is his delight and desire as one who partakes of divine life. God's commands are not 'grievous' (burdensome *or* oppressive) as were the regulations of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23.4). The word of God is a 'perfect law of liberty' to the redeemed soul (James 1.25; 2.12). Furthermore, obedience to God's commandments is for our own well-being and reward (Psalm 19.11).

**v.4:** 'For' indicates the explanation of v.3. God's commandments are not 'grievous' because, having been born of God through faith, obedience enables the saint to 'overcome' the *world* (as well as the *devil* and *flesh*, 2.14; 3.9). The context of the letter suggests a particular victory over the false teachers – only possible through firm adherence to the word of God (2.14). *Vine: The spirit of the world is opposed to the fulfillment of the commandments of God. To do His commandments, therefore, is to overcome the spirit of the world.* The neuter 'whatsoever' emphasises the divine life (power) by which the believer (person) overcomes. Every believer is constantly overcoming (*nikao*, 'carry off the victory') the world as the new birth enables him to recognise the evil nature of the world and defeat its various temptations and principles through obedience to God's commandments. The initial victory was accomplished through faith at conversion, but the conflict continues. **v.5:** The object of the overcomer's faith is none other than Jesus, the Son of God. He has overcome the world's hatred and emerged victorious from the climax of that opposition at Calvary (John 16.33). *FB Hole: Let faith once lay hold of the essential and eternal glories of the Son of God, and the world loses its attraction, and can be laid aside as a very little thing.*

## The Witness to Eternal Life [5.6-12]

**v.6:** These verses present *three* witnesses to the fact that God has 'given to us eternal life' in His Son (v.11) – the water, blood and Spirit. Christ's coming to provide eternal life was 'made effective' through (in the *character* of, JND) 'water and blood' (Wuest). Mankind has a double need in respect of eternal life. He is dead requiring the *water* of new birth (4.9); he is guilty requiring the *blood* that makes propitiation (4.10). Water is the symbol of life imparted (by the Spirit through the word, John 3.5); blood is the symbol of life laid down. The mention of such elements cannot fail to remind the reader of John's own witness at the cross (John 19.34). The reverse order of 'blood and water' is due to the divine standpoint of John's gospel (Exodus 12.13). *Vine: The leper needed not only the application of the blood of sacrifice but he was required to bathe his flesh in water, symbolizing cleansing and life (Leviticus 14.14).* Christ came 'in the power of' (*en*) both water and blood. Whilst John bore testimony to the historical event (John 19.35), the Spirit bears witness to the same today by His very presence on earth (John 7.39) – and His testimony is reliable (truth). It is His indwelling presence which enables us to appreciate the *value* of the work of Christ at Calvary.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A large number of commentators interpret 'water' and 'blood' as the *baptism* and *death* of Christ respectively. That Christ came 'through' (*dia*) water, i.e. baptism, suggests He was already the Christ before His baptism and thus combats the error of Cerinthus. That He came 'through' (*dia*) blood suggests He was a real man who gave himself in death and thus dismisses the error of Docetism. However, baptism is never symbolised by water. Baptism is already a symbol, thus using *water* as a symbol to represent a symbol is strange indeed.

**vv.7-8:** These verses contain the famous ‘Johannine Comma’, a discussion of which is beyond the scope of these notes. In simple terms, the words ‘in heaven’ (v.7) to ‘in earth’ (v.8) are not included in any Greek manuscript earlier than the fourteenth century and no version earlier than the fifth century in any other language (WE Vine). Thus, JND translates: ‘For they that bear witness are three: the Spirit, and the water, and the blood; and the three agree in one’. None of the early Greek fathers quote the statement, not even in their frequent debates on the doctrine of the trinity (though 5.20 is a favourite). According to one prominent textual scholar: ‘That these words are spurious and have no right to stand in the NT is certain’ (Bruce Metzger).<sup>2</sup> It is possible, then, that the statement was added by a scribe to support the doctrine of the trinity. In any case, such a *threefold* witness is not required ‘in heaven’ – the fact He is *there* is witness enough! The triple witness (as in accordance with the law, Deuteronomy 17.6) *constantly* testifies to the efficacy of the work of Christ and the eternal life found in Him (v.11), and these three ‘agree in one’ (converge to one truth), i.e. give united testimony. **v.9:** John explains that this witness is divine and therefore entirely trustworthy. Since we accept, as we generally do, the testimony of men, how much *more* should we accept the testimony of God? The witness of God concerning His Son is greater both in terms of being more *reliable* and *trustworthy*, and greater in *value* for He fully knows the worth of His person and work.

**v.10:** The divine testimony concerning the ‘Son of God’ is *accepted* and *appropriated* by the one that believeth ‘on’ (*eis*) the Son of God – a preposition which implies relationship through personal faith in Him. Faith is directed towards, and centres in (union), the person of God’s Son – the one to whom witness is borne. In contrast, those like the false teachers who refuse the witness, declare God to be a liar. *Stott: Unbelief is not a misfortune to be pitied; it is a sin to be deplored.* John employs both *present* and *perfect* tenses in these verbs suggesting a past act and continuing condition. When the crisis of choice came, the message was refused, thus declaring God a liar. The consequences of such choice cling to the individual. **v.11:** The witness is twofold. God has given every believer eternal life, and the sole communicator of this life is the Son of God. Eternal life has been ‘given’ (as a free gift) and is offered *in* the person of the Son (Romans 6.23). And this life of God (lit. ‘belonging to the age’) is a *present* possession. **v.12:** To ‘have’ the Son is to enjoy a personal relationship with Him as the object of one’s faith (cf. John 14.20, 23) and possess ‘the life’ which is His inherently (John 11.25; 14.6). The full title ‘Son of God’ in the *second* part of the verse proclaims the *significance* of the one rejected.

#### The Assurance of Eternal Life [5.13-21]

The final verses of the epistle include the word ‘know’ *seven* times, *six* of which translate *oida*; an absolute and full knowledge, often divinely imparted (cf. Matthew 6.8). The other use of ‘know’ (v.20b) translates the word *ginosko*; a knowledge learnt or acquired through experience. Every believer should be **assured** of eternal life.

- Assurance of Salvation. **v.13:** Whilst John write his gospel that readers might ‘have life’ (John 20.31), the first epistle is written to give *assurance* of salvation – that ye may ‘know’ (*oida*) ye have eternal life. Such assurance is not found in ecstatic feelings, but the word of God. Furthermore, divine life cannot be hidden – it must be manifest in the life in terms of confession (5.1, 5), conduct (2.3; 3.10) and compassion (3.14). The RV translates ‘even unto you that believe on (*eis*) the name of the Son of God’. The name of the Son of God represents all He is and has done. A person’s name is an expression of their character (e.g. Jehovah Jireh).
- Assurance *in* Supplication. **v.14:** The almost abrupt change of subject suggests that salvation expresses itself in active prayer and intercession. Given the intimacy of the family relationship, we have ‘confidence’ (*freedom* of speech without *fear* or embarrassment) in our approach before the Father. In fact, if we ‘ask anything according to His will’ He *hears* us (implying answered prayer, **v.15**). But note, answered prayer depends upon asking according to ‘His’ will, not ours! The *word* of God reveals the *will* of God and thus we should pray in accordance with its principles and precepts. For example, Moses interceded on behalf of Israel according to the promise of God given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 32.13). Compare Daniel 9.2, 17-19. **v.16:** To illustrate, John describes two specific cases of intercessory prayer – one according to the will of God, and one not. In this difficult verse, John refers to ‘death’ (*thanatos*) and ‘life’ (*zoe*) – terms which are always used in a *spiritual* sense by John (cf. 3.14). ‘Sin unto death’ likely refers to a person who has rejected the witness of God concerning His Son (v.10), a sin which issues in eternal death (v.12). Again, John has the ‘antichrists’ (apostates) in view (2.18). They once companied with the saints and gave intellectual assent to apostolic truth, but subsequently departed in denial of the true humanity and deity of Christ (2.19). Their continued disposition and course of conduct left each one without hope. The believer should not ‘make enquiries’ (*erotao*, to ask as an equal) or offer intercessory prayer for such a person (cp. John 17.9; Jeremiah 7.16-18; 11.12-14). However, intercessory prayer **is** to be made for a genuine brother observed to be ‘sinning a sin’, i.e. engaged in some sinful practice, but not of the same character as the apostates. Believers must pray, not gossip, for the recovery of such a person and God will give him ‘life’, i.e. the restoration of the enjoyment and marred expression of eternal life. *Hay: Pray, for while every aspect of injustice, dishonesty, untruthfulness, immorality and*

<sup>2</sup> For an alternative view see: **GW & DE Anderson**, Why 1 John 5.7-8 is in the Bible, *Trinitarian Bible Society* (1993).

*evil speaking is sin, it is not 'unto death'. Failure need not be final; recovery can be effected; restoration can be experienced.* **v.17:** But we must never think that some sins are merely trivial. Every act that is inconsistent with the mind and will of God (i.e. unrighteousness) is sin.

- Assurance of Security. **v.18:** Could a genuine believer commit the 'sin unto death'? No! Those who are 'born of God' cannot abide (habitually) in sin, for the seed of divine life is within (3.9). Rather than 'he that is begotten of God keepeth himself' (AV), the ESV reads: 'he who was born of God protects him'. John uniquely uses the *aorist* tense suggesting, not the believer, but the Lord Jesus is in view as 'the Begotten of God'. It is therefore Christ that keeps (guards) the believer from the clutches of the 'wicked (malicious) one' (cf. John 17.12; 1 Peter 1.5; Jude 24). The devil seeks to *assault* but cannot *seize* or *grasp* the believer – he is tightly held in the hand of the Saviour. Eternal security does not depend on our grip of Christ, but His grip on us. **v.19:** True believers know (*oida*) they are born 'out of' God – the source of divine life – and thus belong to Him, not the world. This conscious knowledge and assurance of the child of God contrasts the ignorance of the world. It (and those who belong to it) reclines *unconcerned* and *complacent* in the lap of the wicked one – sound asleep (as an infant in its mother's arms) in its unbelief. Whilst Satan cannot claim the saint, the world remains in his power and under his influence – he orchestrates its life and activities in opposition and rebellion against God.
- Assurance *in the Son*. **v.20:** But, again, believers know (*oida*) that the 'Son of God is come'. He was 'manifested' to 'take away our sins' (3.5); He was 'sent' to be the 'Saviour' (4.14); but He is 'come' (as an abiding reality) to give us 'understanding' of the true (genuine) God. 'Understanding' (*dianoia*) is literally 'through mind', i.e. to pass beyond the superficial (John 1.18). As such, we 'know (*ginosko*) Him that is true', i.e. believers grow in their experience and appreciation of God through Christ. Indeed, genuine believers have a vital, spiritual relationship with God 'in His Son Jesus Christ' – 'this one' (NET) **is** 'the true God and eternal life' – a statement which clearly refers to the Lord Jesus (cf. 1.2). What a declaration of deity!

**v.21:** In a final appeal to *all* his readers, John commands his 'children' to unhesitatingly and urgently guard themselves (personal responsibility) from idols. They must be ready to repulse every attack, like a shepherd defending his sheep. Again, the context of the epistle suggests this is a warning against the false teaching of the antichrists. *Hiebert: Their infatuation with their own views concerning the true God and His incarnate Son was indeed a new kind of idolatry.* Any vision or perception of God that falls short of His full revelation in the word of God is idolatrous. Yet, John's warning is as relevant today as ever. God keep us from any object to which we might cleave that displaces Christ in our primary affections and loyalty.