

Final Certainty
The Certainty of Faith
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Bible Text: 1 John 5:18-21
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A secular authority on public speaking once said, "Tell your audience what you're going to say, and then say it, and then tell them what you just said." A little three-point outline there for public speaking. That's not bad advice, even if I wouldn't totally embrace everything that the man who said that was known for, but as we come to our final passage in 1 John, you can turn in your Bibles to 1 John, as you come to the final passage of 1 John, that is exactly what is going on here. The Apostle John is summarizing everything that he has said in the letter. He had said up front what he was going to say, he spent five chapters saying it, and now as we come to this final passage, he is telling us what he had just said in order to bring things to a fitting climax and conclusion that would justify and vindicate everything that he had said.

Now, throughout the book of 1 John, the apostle has been teaching his readers how to achieve spiritual victory in a hostile world. How is it that we as believers face the world and the devil and false teachers and the trials and temptations that come to us, how is it that you obtain spiritual victory through all of those supernatural foes? Or more accurately, over all of those supernatural foes? John has spent the entire book describing that and explaining it as he was refuting the false teachers who were abusing his readers. Now as we come to the final four verses, he summarizes everything to make his final impact and call to action. He closes on a final note of certainty.

Look at verses 18 through 21 with me. John says,

18 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. 19 We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. 20 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. 21 Little children, guard yourselves from idols.

Now as you look at that passage as we just kind of approach it from an overview fashion, look at the beginning of the first three verses and John starts them in the exact same way. He says, "We know," verse 18. "We know," verse 19. "We know," verse 20. Verse 20,

"We know him who is true. We know him who is true. This is the true God and eternal life." I want you to notice something very crucial as we approach this passage. John is speaking in the language of dogmatic affirmations. He is speaking in the language of certainty. He is not making hesitant suggestions. He is not speaking in the academic doublespeak of deference and possibilities. He is speaking in a language of clarity, a language of certainty. Not confusion. Not doubt. John isn't like some of the modern teachers of the Bible today who delight in stimulating doubt in their hearers; stimulating confusion; asking questions but never getting around to answering them; posing difficulties but never solving them. John does the exact opposite here. He has said what he has to say and now he is coming and driving home, pounding the nails home with a final word of exhortation and what he has done here is he has really summarized all of the themes that he has said throughout the earlier part of the letter.

So we're going to look at two aspects. Right now I'm getting ready to tell you what I'm about to say, all right? We're going to look at the certain realities of salvation that John explains in verses 18 through 20, and then we're going to look in verse 21 at the corresponding responsibility of salvation. The certain realities of salvation in verses 18 through 20, and the corresponding responsibility of salvation, the responsibility that flows from being a possessor of eternal life. So that's where we're going to go and now I'm going to tell you all about this, not all about it. I've spent 43 messages up to this point in 1 John and what John has done here is he is summarizing everything that goes before and so we are not going to try to unpack everything, we're going to summarize it simply like John does.

So point 1: the certain realities of salvation. Now, as you go through this final section, John is acting like a skilled trial attorney who is making his closing argument. He is driving the jury to the verdict that they need to reach. He is summarizing everything that has been presented in order to call them to action. He lays out here three realities of salvation in verses 18 through 20 and these are just summaries of what has gone on before. First of all, the first certain reality of salvation that he gives here as he summarizes, is he sets forth the certainty of our sanctification. This would be the first subpoint of the main point, the certainty of our sanctification. John begins to close his argument here by emphasizing, once more, that holiness will mark the true Christian.

Look at verse 18 with me. He says,

18 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.

Look at the way John expresses this. He speaks not only in the language of certainty, but he speaks in absolute certainty. He doesn't allow for any exceptions when he says this. He says, "We know that no one who is born of God sins." You recognize a true Christian from false professors of Christianity because his relationship to sin changes. There is a certain and an inevitable consequence from becoming a Christian and that is there is an increasing growth in sanctification, there is an increasing separation from sin. John here is not teaching that a Christian never commits an act of sin, but he is saying that true

Christians do not live in an unbroken pattern of sin, and he said this repeatedly throughout the letter. Stated differently, you can recognize a true Christian because they are committed to turning away from sin as the overall mark of their lives. That is what Christians do. True Christians do not truly come to Christ in order to have Jesus give them a better life, in order to have Jesus make them happy. True Christians, the point of conversion, the point of salvation is that we come to Christ in order to be delivered from sin and God in his act of salvation does that. He delivers us from the power of sin and that deliverance has certain inevitable consequences in the life of the one who is truly redeemed.

Now, how can John speak in such language of certainty? He can say it with certainty, he can say it without exception because without exception, true salvation changes a man's nature. 2 Corinthians 5:17, "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; behold, the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come." New things have come. There is a new nature and a true Christian lives according to that new nature which is oriented toward God's holiness and away from the sinful manner of his former life. God, as we've said so many times in the act of regeneration, plants a new nature in the man's heart. He takes out the stony heart and puts in a heart of flesh, and because the heart is beating with new lifeblood, new life comes out without exception. Without exception. The seed that is planted will necessarily grow and bear fruit. That's why we speak with dogmatic certainty on this point.

Look back at chapter 3, verse 9 where John addressed this earlier in the letter. You'll see as we go through this passage here today, how he just picks up on themes that he has already been talking about earlier in the letter. He says in chapter 3, verse 9, he says, "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him," God's seed abides in him, "and he cannot sin," in other words, he cannot go on sinning, "because he is born of God." He has been born into a new family and that new family has new characteristics that inevitably mark themselves.

Now, as we go back to verse 18, chapter 5, verse 18, we see that there is something else that guarantees this holiness in the life of a believer. There is something else that makes it certain, that makes this inevitable as a consequence of true salvation, so inevitable, so necessarily true, that the absence of this is a sure mark of someone who has never been converted in the first place. What is the other thing that guarantees this that goes beyond the fact that God has caused us to be born again, God has placed his Holy Spirit within us? What else is there, as if that weren't enough? What else is there that shows the comprehensive glory of salvation that God has given to us?

Look at verse 18 with me again. He says, "We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God," a reference to Jesus Christ as shown by the change in the verb tense in the original language and in your NASB, a capital H marking out that interpretation as well, "He who was born of God," Jesus Christ who is historically born into the human race by the power of Holy Spirit, that one who is born of God keeps the child of God, "keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him." Jesus Christ keeps us so that we do not fall back into our former way of sin; so that we do not fall back into the

former manner of life; so that we do not completely apostatize back into the person we were before. It's not just that God has given us a new nature, but now that he has given us a new nature, the Son of God himself keeps us in salvation. He keeps us progressing in salvation. Through all of the ups and downs of life, through all of the ups and downs of spiritual growth, the unseen hand of the powerful Lord Jesus Christ is guaranteeing our further progress in holiness. Jesus Christ keeps this child of God.

S. Lewis Johnson said, "We as Christians are the objects of the keeping ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ who through the Spirit, indwells us and keeps us from persistent sin." Part of the ministry of Christ, part of his multifaceted, loving, gracious ministry to the redeemed is that he keeps us from sin, and the powerful work of Christ, the powerful hand of Christ, cannot be thwarted. He cannot fail in his ministry. He cannot fail to do what he has said that he would do. His salvation cannot fail and because Christ cannot fail and because he is the one who has saved us and the reason that he has saved us was to save us from sin, then it is inevitable, it is necessary, it is certain that the true child of God will not continue in sin in the way that he did before his salvation. There will be a change in life. There will be a change in nature. There is a change in nature that manifests itself and the absence of that evidence of sanctification is certain proof that a person was never born again to begin with. Not saying, as we said before, we're not saying that a Christian never sins.

Look back at chapter 1. You have to keep the totality of what John says in mind to stay balanced in what he's saying so that you don't go places that he doesn't intend you to go. It's not a matter that we never commit acts of sin, it's that the whole orientation toward sin is different because in chapter 1, verse 9, he says, "If we confess our sins," if we are confessing our sins, the language means, "He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Chapter 2, verse 1, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins," if despite this provision you still find yourself from time to time sinning, "we have an Advocate with the Father," who has us covered, whose blood has turned away the wrath of God from us.

So John is talking about more than individual acts of sin, he's talking about something deeper and more profound. He's talking about an orientation of life and he says the true child of God is so oriented away from sin that we can rightly say that he does not continue in sin now that he has been saved and the spiritual reality undergirding that is the keeping ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you are a Christian here this morning, the Lord Jesus Christ himself is keeping you by name in order to preserve you in holiness. Call that to mind the next time temptation comes your way. Call that to mind the next time you are tempted toward discouragement and despair. Call that to mind. Call to mind the keeping ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ whose personal hand is on your personal life. There are no exceptions to the true Christian. We are wonderfully blessed, aren't we? This is amazing and this is not subject to debate. This is not subject to question. The Apostle John says we know this. This is certain. On the authority of God's word, we know this to be true and in it we find our motivation for holiness and our motivation to persevere.

In the passage that Sean read a little earlier, turn back to John 17. I want to go back there for just a moment. Jesus alluded to this aspect of his ministry. He manifested this aspect of his ministry even during his earthly life with the 12 disciples. Chapter 17, verse 12. I want you to turn there if you haven't. John 17:12 where Jesus said, "While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled." Verse 15, "I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one." And he is praying and he's saying, "I'm keeping them and I ask you, Father, to keep them." And in verse 20 he says, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone," those that were around him at the time, "but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one."

We have an awesome Redeemer. I mean, adjectives just fail me when we talk about this. There aren't adjectives that are lofty enough and grand enough from the fallen lips of a sinful man using fallen language to express how glorious this is. The Son of God not only came and sacrificed his life in order to redeem us from sin, he not only was raised from the dead and intercedes for us now at the right hand of the Father, he is keeping us. Oh my friends, your heart should just melt with glorious overflowing gratitude and thanksgiving and praise to Christ if you have any portion of the Holy Spirit. The reality of these truths lift your thoughts and lift your heart to places of glory that nothing else does. This is why we love Christ with all of our heart, soul, strength and mind. This is why we are devoted to him. This is why we are committed to him. This is why we are committed to his word. He has been so gracious to us and he still is and he will be throughout the unfolding of all the ages of eternity. I love him, don't you?

Now in describing the keeping ministry of Christ, the last thing that we would say is now that Jesus is keeping us we have no responsibility to actively pursue holiness. That is not what John teaches. That is not what anyone has said that has been true to the Bible. In fact, in verse 21, John is going to conclude with a command that requires the pursuit of holiness in the lives of those who know Christ, but what we're saying here is that the ultimate success in our pursuit of sanctification, the ultimate keeping power comes from Christ himself. He keeps us. He preserves us and, therefore, sanctification is a certain reality of our salvation.

That's the positive expression of it. John expresses it in the negative side as well as he does throughout this letter. He'll state something in a positive way and then he'll state the other side, the negative aspect of it. The head of the coin and the tail of the coin, so to speak. He goes back and forth and covers all of the bases. He makes positive affirmations and he makes negative declarations all to bring us to a point of clarity in our thinking, a point of assurance, a point of certainty about these things. Listen, I understand and Phil Johnson has taught much better and much more often than I have, that in certain circles, spiritual doubt is perceived as a virtue, as an expression of humility. It is not. It is a gross sin for someone to come to the Bible and read the kinds of things that we see here in front of us today and say, "No, I doubt that. I question that. I can't be sure." The whole point of 1 John is that you would be sure and the arrogance lies not in the one who proclaims

certainty but the one who questions it; the one who would not only question it himself but lead other people into doubt and uncertainty rather than clarifying questions so that they could have the kind of assurance for which this book was written.

Verse 18, the other aspect of this. Christ keeps us, in a positive sense. Look at the end of verse 18, he says, "the evil one does not touch him." A reference to the devil. A reference to Satan himself and all of those powers that are under his control. What this is saying is that Christ's protection of his own is so thorough and complete that even the devil himself does not have the power to lay hold of us and harm us. There really isn't much need to go around praying to rebuke Satan and, you know, casting him out by the mighty name of Jesus. Jesus does that anyway. The evil one does not touch him. Christ our Savior protects us from him, protects us from that kind of harm, and you see that illustrated in the life of Job where God set specific boundaries around what the devil could do. The devil does not have unhindered access to us as believers. He doesn't. He cannot touch us. He cannot touch us and ultimately harm us. The whole idea of the being saved, being delivered, in part is a deliverance from the power and domination of the devil.

I love Christ, don't you? To have been a child of the devil, to have been under his domination, to be a child of wrath and Christ delivers us from that, he has delivered us from that with ongoing results and now we are free from that, free from that fear, under the sovereign gracious hand of God, the sovereign gracious hand, the nail scarred hands, you might say, of our Redeemer? What a magnificent position we have in Christ. What glory should be going from our hearts up to his holy throne as we consider these things. To be sure, Christians are still subject to temptation but God establishes the boundaries. He draws a circle around us, as it were, so that it never exceeds the place that he has brought us to spiritually. Let me remind you of 1 Corinthians 10:13 in this context. You don't need to turn there but jot it down in your notes. It's an important cross-reference. 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man," and here's the point for today, "and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able," because he keeps us, because the devil does not have unrestricted access to us. He cannot lay hold of us and harm us in an ultimate sense.

So rather than giving into the severe trials and temptations that come our way, here's a point of application, when we see them coming, when we find ourselves in the midst of them, the very fury of the trial should strengthen us and encourage us all the more to realize that even the power of this trial is not something that is beyond the power that God has given to protect me and to sustain me, and you measure the vast scope of his power, the vast scope of the power of salvation even in the midst of your worst trials and struggles, by recognizing that the power of that has to be subordinate to the greater power of God. And while it seems overwhelming at the time, what would otherwise overwhelm you simply becomes an indicator, a leading indicator of an even greater power that protects you because if it actually had the ability to overwhelm you, it would never have come to you in the first place. So you measure the depth of the power that holds you sometimes by the depths of the trials that the Lord allows to come into your life, and as a believer in Christ, those severe trials are simply a measure, an indicator of a greater power that John says cannot touch you, cannot harm you. It's an indication that even

through that, Christ is going to keep you. The certainty of sanctification that he expresses here is rooted in the ministry of Christ on behalf of those that he loves and we love him in response.

Now there's a second certainty that he lays out here. It's the certainty of our separation. The certainty of our separation. We looked at the certainty of sanctification in the sense that Christ keeps us from sin, now we are looking at the certainty of our separation in verse 19. Read it there with me. Look down at the page of your Bible and see these words for yourself. Verse 19,

19 We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

This is a sharp contrast that he lays out here. He says we know that we are of God. John joins in the first person plural now. He's not speaking as an abstract principle, he's speaking in the language of first person plural experience. We know this and he says we know that we are of God. The fact that we are believers, we know that that means that our origin comes from God himself. We are in the family. God himself is the source of our new life and we belong to him. I love that word "belong." We belong to him and he belongs to us. As the hymn writer says, "I am his and he is mine." We rightly call him our Lord, our Savior, in the sense that he belongs to us and he rightly calls us his beloved. We belong to him. We have been delivered from this evil world. We stand separated from it. We are in the family of God. We belong to him. He has plucked us out of the wicked world system, transferred us into the beloved kingdom of his Son, Colossians 1:13. That is a certainty of our salvation that we have been delivered from the world; that God himself has given birth to us and the world no longer has dominion over us. We have been separated from that.

Now by contrast, look at verse 19 again. He says, "We know that we are of God," we come from God, we belong to God, we will always belong to God, throughout all of the halls of endless ages we will belong to this same God who has saved us and that we know here and now. It's only going to get expansively and exponentially greater throughout all of the infinite time of eternity, but by contrast, the world lies helplessly in the arms of Satan. John sets up, as it were, two different camps. There is the camp of God in Christ, there is the camp of the world that is ruled by the devil. There is no other camp. You are either in Christ or the devil is your father. Everyone outside of Christ, everyone who is not a true Christian, name any religion that you want to that is not biblical Christianity and they are under the domination of the devil. It's the same thing for the foolishness of the atheist as it is for the most ardent Muslim or Catholic or Hindu, whatever you want to write in there. Either you are in Christ or you are miserably lost whether you recognize it or not.

The devil controls this world system and he orchestrates it to express his own rebellion against God. Look around you. Everywhere is the proof of that. In our media, in our social things, in our politics, everything around has the certain hand of someone that is opposed to the God of the Bible. The Apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:2 said it this way

talking about this same separation from the world. Ephesians 2:2, he said, "you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience." You were formerly under the domination of the devil, is what he's saying. But then he goes on in verse 4 and says, "But God. But God, by the riches of his grace has caused us, has made us alive together in Christ (by grace you have been saved)." Saved. Delivered from that. It's a certainty of salvation. We do not belong to this world. We do not belong to it, we are not under its power anymore. We are under the power of the one who shed his precious blood to save our souls and it is right and accurate to say that only those who have been born again are truly free. A slave to Christ, yes, but free in that slavery. Everyone else is a slave to the devil. The whole world, John says in chapter 5, verse 19, lies in the power of the evil one. Asleep at the wheel. Drunken. Blind and headed for the cliff. That's the picture of the man without Christ with nothing to arouse him, nothing to save him, nothing to stop the inevitable destruction of his soul when the car goes over the cliff.

And you as a believer in Christ have been saved from that. How grateful and thankful should we be. Who else could have broken the hold of the devil? Throughout all of history there was no one to break the power of the devil but Christ himself. If Christ had not intervened, no one would have been saved. Who else but Christ could have intervened in your own life to save you and deliver you from your own bondage to sin, your own blindness by the devil? No one else. And the fact that we are not under his domination and bondage anymore is a sure sign that we are of God, that we belong to him, that our life has found its ultimate origin in him as we stand here today in Christ. I love him, don't you?

Verse 18, we've seen the certainty of our sanctification; verse 19, the certainty of our separation; the third certainty of our salvation, certain reality that I want to lay out, comes from verse 20 and we could just title it this way: the certainty of our Savior. The certainty of our Savior. The certainty of who he is. Certainty comes from the Son of God and there is certainty about who he is. Read verse 20 with me, John says, "we know." Again, the utter certainty of this. The unqualified certainty of this should strike you as you read this.

20 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.

We know these things. We know as a matter of established fact that the Son of God came historically; he came in time and space; he was incarnated in a human body; born of a virgin; lived for 33 some years and was crucified. He came. We know this. It is certain. It is established. And he came not only in human flesh, it's not just that he appeared, as it were, but he came to rescue us from spiritual darkness. He came with a specific purpose. He came as Luke 19 says, to seek and to save that which was lost, to rescue us. And John here in chapter 5, verse 20, says that part of that, an aspect of that saving mission was that he came to give us understanding. He has given us understanding, an understanding that has abiding results as we go through life. We have this understanding. We have, he has given to us – get this – he has given to us the intellectual and spiritual power necessary to

have the spiritual discernment that we need to grow in our knowledge of him. He has given us understanding. He has given us a power of mind and a power of heart so that we could apprehend biblical truth; so that we could apprehend the true nature of Christ; so that we could apprehend our need for him; so that we could apprehend the reality of our sin; so that we could apprehend his redemption; so that we could appropriate his redemption. All of that is something that he has given us understanding to appropriate. He has given us understanding so that for this purpose, so that we may know the true God.

Think about your life before Christ. Think of your life even now and the imperfections and the sin that still mark your existence, your periodic cold-heartedness, your prayerlessness and your lack of love for Christ. Think of that. Think of you in your sin and imperfection and realize afresh from this passage that if Christ saved you out of that knowing full well the nature of your soul and the nature of your condition, that if Christ saved you out of that, it had to be an act of his free and sovereign grace and mercy because there was nothing in you to merit that kind of intervention. If you are enjoying these benefits of salvation, these divine certainties, these divine realities, step back and realize once more that it's because Christ has been good to you, not because you were good to Christ and he needed to reward you for it, and let that be a thought that motivates you to greater affection toward him. The Son of God has come and he has given understanding to us so that we could enter into a true relationship with the one true God. That is so profound and glorious and it is a fitting way for John to draw this letter to a close. This is the whole reason that he wrote was for us to appreciate these things afresh and to be joyful as a result of them, to be sanctified as a result of these truths, to have assurance as a result of these truths.

Now, look at the verse again with me, verse 20. He says he "has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true." At that particular point, I believe he's referring to God the Father. We may know him who is true. Why do you say it's the Father? Because he goes on and says, "we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ." The word "Son" there requires a Father to have that clause hold itself together. We know we are in the true God because we are in his only Son, Jesus Christ. We know that we are in the Father because we are in the Son. That's the true God, the genuine God, the only true God. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." Acts 4:12, "There is salvation in no one else. There is no other name given under heaven by which men must be saved but the name of Christ." So if you are in Christ today, you know the true God, the genuine God. If you are not in Christ, you do not know God. These are certainties. We know the one genuine God over against all of the other idols and false gods who are not genuine.

Look at the final sentence there. I didn't read all of verse 20, did I? Look at this concluding line. This line that we are about to read together is the climax of the entire epistle. Chapter 1, verse 1, through chapter 2, through chapter 3, through chapter 4, through chapter 5 is all leading up to this one point. It's all designed to draw this one statement into powerful focus in a way that preempts any remaining doubt or questions. He says, "This is the true God and eternal life." When he says "this," he's not referring to

the Father anymore, he's referring to Jesus Christ. When he uses this pronoun "this," the nearest antecedent is Jesus Christ. We are in Christ. This is the true God. It's connected together there. Some people think he's still referring to the Father. I'm not going to argue with them but he is referring to Christ here. This has – here's a grammatical term for you – its closest antecedent is Jesus Christ, but there is another even more compelling reason to understand that this climactic statement is a direct reference to Christ himself, the second person of the Trinity, and therefore is a definitive statement of the deity of Christ, the true God. He's saying Christ is the true God. "I'm not into grammar, Don. Help me see something else. Add to that, if you can." Well, I can. It's not hard at all. This is going to be convincing to you and you need to see this.

Go back to chapter 1, verse 1. We're stepping back some 40 messages now in my own exposition of 1 John. This is so clear and convincing and powerful to help us understand. Listen, what John was saying at the end of his letter was the same thing he was saying at the start of his letter. He was talking about the same one at the end of his letter as he was at the start of the letter. There is no question about this. These are bookends and everything in between the bookends was designed to reinforce the one point that Jesus is the true God and eternal life.

Look at chapter 1, verse 1. He says, "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life." That is a clear statement of reference to the apostle's personal interaction with Jesus during his human life here on earth, during his Incarnation. That is what he's talking about. We heard it with our own ears. We saw it with our own eyes. We touched him with our own hands. Verse 2, this "life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life." There it is. The eternal life at the start. The eternal life at the end. Jesus Christ who was with the Father and was manifested to us, he was with the Father and was manifested to us, now in verse 3 he says, all of that that we have seen and heard is what I'm going to proclaim to you in this letter. He said, "I'm talking to you about Christ here at the start. I'm talking to you about the eternal life who was with the Father." Clearly a reference to Christ there at the start, and then he unfolds this magnificent letter all the way to the end, working through in sometimes seemingly almost circuitous fashion, all of the different implications of that through 10 verses of chapter 1, 29 verses of chapter 2, 24 verses of chapter 3, 21 verses of chapter 4, 20 verses now of chapter 5, and having exhausted everything that he had to say about the subject, he comes back to where he began and he says, "This is the true God and eternal life. I told you at the start I was going to tell you about Jesus Christ. I have told you about him and now I mention him for one final time. In his Son, Jesus Christ, everything I've been saying, understand now, this Jesus Christ is the true God and eternal life."

All that John has written supports this great climax: Jesus Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus at the right hand of the Father, is the true God. Of this there is absolute certainty. Of this we will tolerate no doubts. Of this the salvation of men depends. If Christ is not truly God, then there is no eternal life. The two are joined together. There is no salvation if Christ is not the true God, but he is the true God and there is salvation and it is found in

him alone. John says, "I'm done. That is why I wrote, that you might know Christ and in him find assurance." Those are the certain realities of our salvation. When you understand the bookend nature of that, 1:1 to 5:20, that it's all bookends, then you can see the second point here and see the seemingly odd end to this letter in verse 21.

Point 2 here before I forget to tell you what it is again. Point 2. We've seen the certain realities of salvation. Point 2: we're going to see the corresponding responsibility of salvation. The corresponding responsibility of salvation. In other words, here's what you do in light of chapter 1, verse 1, through chapter 5, verse 20. He's said everything that he has to say and now he just makes a quick point of application but an important point of application, an expansive point of application done in only six words in the English text.

John here instead of giving a formal farewell like the Apostle Paul often does, "May the grace of God be with you," in the place of formal farewell, John goes back one more time to his pastoral tone to these readers and he calls them little children. He's finishing the letter now. He's said everything that is necessary to bring them to a point of certainty and assurance of salvation and now his heart is full one final time and he says, "Little children, my beloved disciples, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ over whom I have apostolic authority but with whom I am filled with great pastoral affection.

21 Little children [I say this to you], guard yourselves from idols.

Guard yourselves from idols. Doesn't that seem like kind of a weird way to end the letter? We've been talking about Christ and certainty and all of a sudden, guard yourselves from idols. Well, the truth of the matter is that that's the perfect way to end this letter. Of course it's perfect, it's what the Holy Spirit inspired. In this time, in this culture, there were literal physical idols everywhere. Christians would have been living out there salvation in the midst of pagan religion, and some people think that those literal physical false gods, those gods of stone, idols of stone is what John is referring to here, but that's not what he's talking about. It might have a point of application there, it had a point of application to them there, but that's not what he's talking about here. He hasn't been talking about physical idols at all anywhere in the letter.

What has he been talking about? What has he been trying to protect them from? The false teachers who were undermining the truth about Christ. He was refuting throughout this letter false teachers. He said in chapter 4, verse 1, "test the spirits to see whether they be from God." So having said, "this is the true Christ," in verse 20, he says in the next breath, "guard yourselves against idols," and in the context of his whole letter what he's saying is, "Take everything that I've said and use it to protect yourself from those who would lead you away from the truth. Guard yourself against the false teaching that proclaims a false Christ. Be true to the true God. Be faithful to him. Be faithful to him in your love and obedience. Be faithful to him in your teaching. Be faithful to him in what you believe. Be faithful to him as you turn away and discern false teachers. Guard yourselves." He says, "There is a responsibility that falls upon you in light of these great truths. Yes, Christ keeps you but you are responsible to work these things out with fear

and trembling." It's a perfect way to end the letter. "I've shown you the true God, now guard yourselves from the false ones. Guard yourselves from the ambassadors of lies."

So what does that mean to us today? What does all of this from 1 John mean to us? John intends for us to be at rest in these truths, for there to be a settled assurance in our minds that we are in Christ, that we belong to him, that our salvation is secure, that in the midst of this hostile world we would be marked by joy and holiness and assurance. He means for you to rest your destiny on these certainties and to not let them be subject to question and doubt in your mind or in the minds of those over whom you have influence. He's saying, "Love this true God who is eternal life and in that, find your spiritual victory in the midst of this hostile world." And we could say that John at that point says, "That's final."

Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you for these great certainties of our salvation. We thank you that you have brought us out of darkness and into light and that you have given us your only Son so that we might have eternal life and that we might have understanding and enjoy the blessings and privileges that belong to those who are truly your children. Father, may you frustrate every effort of the devil, every effort of the world around us to distract us from the true knowledge of Christ, and may you make us instruments of proclaiming his glory and manifesting his glory all the more. Father, help us as we guard ourselves from idols and from false teachers and from false ways of thinking. And Father, if there are still those in light of all of these truths that still do not know Christ, Father, we ask you to open their hearts to the Gospel. Once again, Father, we pray that you would have mercy upon their sin-shriveled souls. Would you give life to them? Would you open their eyes, open their understanding, so that they might repent of sin and put their faith in Christ for salvation? Father, we thank you for this letter of 1 John. We thank you for all that it has taught us, all that you have taught us through it. We thank you for the Apostle John who wrote it. And now, Father, we commit ourselves to you and we ask you to help us as we rest our destinies on these truths to know that we have established our lives, our souls have been built on a sure foundation that can never be shaken. Father, as your children walk out of this room, let them go forth with joy, with confidence because of the certain realities that belong to us in Christ. We pray in his name. Amen.

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Final Certainty

1 John 5:18-21

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A secular authority on public speaking once said:

*Tell your audience what you are going to say. Then say it.
Then tell them what you just said.*

Throughout 1 John, the apostle has been teaching his readers how to achieve spiritual victory in the midst of a hostile world. John summarizes everything to make his final impact and call to action.

Read 1 John 5:18-21.

These are not hesitant suggestions but dogmatic affirmations which are beyond dispute.

1. The Certain Realities of Salvation

As you go through this final section, you realize John has *already* established the truth of these assertions. He's acting like a skilled trial attorney who is making his closing argument.

A. The Certainty of Our Sanctification

John first emphasizes that holiness will mark the true Christian.

Read 1 John 5:18.

John allows no exceptions: *no one who is born of God sins*. You recognize a true Christian because his relationship to sin changes.

John is not teaching that a Christian never commits an *act* of sin but that true Christians do not live in an unbroken pattern of sin.

Stated differently, a true Christian is personally committed to turning away from sin as the overall mark of his life.

Why is that certain? Salvation changes the man's *nature*. He then acts in accordance with the holy nature God plants into his heart. The seed will necessarily grow and bear fruit.

Read 1 John 3:9.

Something else guarantees holiness. The Son of God Himself keeps us from sin and the dominating influence of the devil.

Read 1 John 5:18.

He who was born of God refers to Jesus Christ, as shown by the verb tenses in the original language. Christ keeps us so that we do not fall back into our former way of sin. S. Lewis Johnson said:

We are the objects of the keeping ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, who, through the Spirit, indwells us and keeps us from persistent sin.

Jesus described this aspect of His own ministry:

Read John 17:12, 15.

That does not relieve us from the responsibility to pursue holiness, but it clarifies that the ultimate success and keeping power comes from Christ. Therefore, it is a certain result of our salvation.

The evil one does not touch him. This has the idea of laying hold of someone with the intent to harm. Satan cannot grab us and harm us because Christ our Savior protects us from such harm.

To be sure, Christians are still subject to temptation. But God establishes the boundaries.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:13.

Rather than giving in to the severe trials and temptations that come our way, we should be strengthened all the more. We know that the power of Christ enables us to meet it without giving into sin or despair.

The certainty of sanctification is rooted in the ministry of Christ.

B. The Certainty of Our Separation

God is the source of our new life. We belong to Him. We have been delivered from this evil world and stand separated from it.

Read 1 John 5:19.

We are in the family. We belong to the Lord. We have moved from the wickedness of the world to the purity of life in Christ.

By contrast, the world lies helplessly in the arms of Satan. Everyone outside of Christ lies in the domination of the devil. He controls the world system and orchestrates it to express his own rebellion against God.

Ephesians 2:2: You formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

There is no third camp. Only those who have been born again are free. Everyone else is a slave to the devil—whether in false religion or the foolishness of atheism.

In light of such domination by the devil, what could ever break the hold, both throughout history and in the life of an individual?

3. The Certainty of our Savior

Certainty comes from the Son of God. He came in time and space to rescue us from spiritual darkness. He has given understanding so we can discern true reality.

Read 1 John 5:20.

He has given us the intellectual power and spiritual discernment to grow in the ongoing knowledge of him.

This first portion of this verse refers to God the Father, since it mentions His Son, Jesus Christ. We know that we are in the true God because we are in His only Son, Jesus Christ.

John 14:6: I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

If you are in Christ, you know the true God. If you are not in Christ, you do not know God. These are *certainties*.

Read 1 John 5:20.

To explain all that this verse means would rehearse the prior 43 messages in this series. Let's not do that.

We know the true one. We know the one genuine God over against the idols who are not genuine.

Some people think that "true God" refers to the Father. That's a reasonable interpretation. But it's better to see this as referring to Jesus Christ. It's a ringing statement of His Deity.

There are two good reasons for that. One, "Jesus Christ" is the nearest reference for "this" to refer to. It's the closest antecedent.

There is another compelling reason. He started this letter telling us that he wanted to tell us about Christ.

Read 1 John 1:1-3.

All John has written supports this great climax. Jesus Christ is the true God.

2. The Corresponding Responsibility of Salvation

In place of a formal farewell, John uses his tender address “Little children” to state the corresponding responsibility they have.

Read 1 John 5:21.

Literal, physical idols were everywhere. Christians would have been living out their salvation in the midst of such pagan religion. But John had not been refuting pagan idols, but the false teaching that claimed to be Christian but was not.

Having said “This is the true Christ,” he says, “Guard yourselves against idols.” Guard against the false teaching that proclaims a false Christ. Be true to Christ and test the spirits.”

So what does that mean to us today?

Guard yourself against those things that undermine truth and the certainty of salvation. Rest your destiny on these certainties. Love the true God who is eternal life. In that, find spiritual victory in this hostile world.