

3. John's foundational reassurance to his readers was that they possessed eternal life. That reality was basic to their existence as Christians; without eternal life, they could claim none of the other assurances John mentioned. But because they did share in God's own life through union with Christ by the Spirit, they could be assured that they enjoyed the perfect intimacy that binds together the divine Father and His human children. So also they could be assured of ultimate triumph over sin and the satanic power behind it: "*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*" (5:18). And if the children have obtained victory over the god of the present age, they have also triumphed over the world he rules (5:19).

a. John's statement in 5:18 is part of his closing assurances to his readers, but it also reiterates one of his previous assertions (3:9). These two statements mirror each other, but with certain differences. The biggest difference between them is the content in the second half of each verse. The statements differ, but John's overall point is the same: *The children share in the Father's life and nature, and therefore cannot be characterized by what is antithetical to Him.*

In verse 5:18, John qualified his assertion about the children sinning by noting that "the one who was born of God keeps him." This statement has been variously interpreted as referring to the believer himself (*the one who is born of God keeps himself* – KJV, NKJV), God (*the one who is born of God, God keeps* – NAB), the fact of the believer's new birth (*God's begetting keeps him*), or Jesus as God's begotten Son (*the One who was born of God keeps him* – NAS, ESV, NIV).

- If John had in mind the idea of *protection* from satanic power and attack, then it seems he was referring to a divine "keeping" – in context, either God or the Son. For the Christian's victory over the evil one is God's life and power in him (cf. 2:13-14, 4:4; John 17:11-15; also Luke 22:31-32).

- If, however, John had in mind the idea of *guarding* or watchfulness, then he could have been saying that Christians "keep" themselves. This is the sense expressed by the KJV, NKJV and ASV, and it parallels John's closing exhortation in verse 21. This is possible, but unlikely, given that John used a different verb in verse 21. Also, John's grammar in verse 18 argues against the interpretation that the one born of God keeps himself.

It seems, then, that John meant either that *God* keeps those who are born of Him, or the *Son* who was born of God keeps God's other children who are born of Him. The strongest argument against the *Son* is that John doesn't describe Jesus this way anywhere else in the epistle. He does, however, refer to Him as the *only-begotten*, both in this epistle and in his gospel account (4:9; John 1:14, 18, 3:16, 18). John recognized Jesus as uniquely begotten of God, but also understood that His unique sonship is the basis for the Father begetting other children. John's grammar in 5:18 seems to suggest these twin truths, for he ascribed the keeping of those who *have been* begotten to the power of the One who *was* begotten.

Even if John had God in mind (*God keeps those who are born of Him*), God keeps His children through the Spirit of His Son – the Spirit of Christ who animates, preserves and transforms them (Romans 8:1-2, 9-11; 2 Corinthians 3:18). And so, either directly or indirectly, it seems that John was referring to Jesus. And this being the case, he was making explicit what he only suggested in verse 3:9:

*Those who are born of God have His seed (His life principle) abiding in them, and they share in this life by sharing in the Living One – the incarnate and resurrected Son – who is the first fruits of God’s renewal of mankind. And when God gave them to possess His life in Christ by the Spirit, He also delivered them from the destroying power of the world ruler exercised in sin and death.*

The Son who was uniquely begotten of God imparts God’s life to His other children. And having done so, He protects and preserves the children in that life unto its perfection (John 1:9-13, 3:1-16, 5:25-26, 8:31-42, 10:27-30; also Romans 6:1-11, 8:9-17; Galatians 3:26-4:7; Ephesians 2:1-6; Colossians 1:15-20, 3:1-4).

John, then, tied the children’s assurance of victory over sin – and the satanic force behind sin and its destructive power – to two related truths: first, the fact that they are *born of God* (and so have His seed abiding in them), and secondly, the fact that they are *protected and preserved by the One who was Himself begotten of God*. Both of these realities, in turn, point to the power and work of the *Spirit* (3:24, 4:13; John 14). The Spirit – who is the Spirit of the Father and Son – keeps the children safe from the destroying power of the evil one. He can wage war against them, but he cannot overcome them (2:13-14, 4:4; Revelation 12:1-12).

- b. Six times in closing out his letter, John reminded his readers of the assurance they possessed by virtue of their living knowledge of God through Jesus, the Messiah: “*We know...*” (5:13-20). This knowledge assured them of victory over sin, the evil one and the world he rules because they are sons in the Son and He secures and preserves them by His indwelling Spirit. This emphasis on the children’s knowledge provided the answer to the Gnostic “antichrists” who claimed a higher, more profound knowledge of the Christ. They insisted that their knowledge was true, but they were deceived deceivers seduced by antichrist spirits (4:1-6). John wanted his readers to be absolutely clear that *they* were the “knowing ones,” because they possessed a *living* knowledge of the true God by knowing Jesus the Messiah, as the Spirit of truth revealed Him to them.

This is what it means to be children of God, but this reality has a parallel that applies to all other human beings – a parallel that is its *antithesis*. Just as God’s children are *in* their Father, so it is with the children of the devil: “*We know that we have our life in God, and the whole world lies in the evil one*” (5:19). John recognized that every human being, regardless of what he may believe, has either God or Satan as his father. This is true in the sense that children are *of* their father – they share their father’s likeness, and there are only two human paradigms: that of fallen (satanic) man and man in Christ (3:1-14; cf. John 8:31-45).

Thus John wrote that the whole world exists in the evil one *himself*, rather than under his power. Obviously the world is subject to Satan's deceiving power (ref. 2 Corinthians 11:13-15; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; Revelation 12:9, 20:1-3), but John wanted to emphasize the relationship that exists between the world of men and the satanic *being*. People aren't merely overcome by his deception; they embrace his perspective and orientation as their own. Like him, the "world" hates and refuses the true knowledge of God that is in His incarnate, resurrected and enthroned Son (John 15:18ff). Hence the Spirit, testifying through the Father's children, convicts the world of its unbelief and allegiance to the satanic adversary (John 16:8-11).

This principle of the world existing *in* the evil one is critically important, for it exposes the fallacy that evil deeds show one's connection with the evil one. But John recognized that the issue isn't deeds, but sonship; he had learned from Jesus Himself that every person is either a child of God or a child of the evil one. Furthermore, everyone is born a child of the devil, so that one must *become* a child of God, and this results from a new birth. *Sonship, then, is the issue in human existence, and sonship is a matter of nature and likeness, not behavior per se.* And yet, this criterion doesn't mean that identifying the two kinds of children is simple or automatic. The reason is two-fold: On the one hand, God's children are still subject to the influence of the "old man" and his satanic mind; on the other, the children of the evil one are still the image and likeness of the God who created them (Genesis 9:1-6). The devil's children are, in their essential being, children of God, while God's children, who have become His sons in the Son, still reflect the likeness of their former father in various ways and to various degrees.

And so the absolute distinction between those who are born of God and those who "lie in the evil one" is not absolute in its manifestation. The children reveal who their father is by their fruit, but this fruit is a matter of overall fruitfulness – that is, the fruitfulness of a *life*, rather than the fruit of a *moment*.

- Satan's children can bear fruit that is good *in itself*, and yet it's corrupt because it's *false* – it serves the father of lies (Matthew 7:13-23; John 8:31-47). Paul was a "Hebrew of Hebrews," blameless under God's Torah, and yet he was a blasphemer and evildoer; his seemingly good fruit was the produce of a mind alienated from the truth of the God he thought he knew and served (Philippians 3:1-6; 1 Timothy 1:12-14). The question isn't whether the children of the evil one can do good deeds, but the heart and mind behind those deeds (Colossians 2:20-23; Titus 1:15).
- So the goodness of the fruit of the Father's children will only be fully revealed in the end; at every point and in every instance, their fruit appears deficient at best, if not altogether bad. But the God who is perfecting His life in them has willed that His power should operate and triumph through their weakness and infirmity; where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. By His doing, they have built their house on the rock that is the Messiah, and their fruit will abide, for it is His (John 12:23-24, 15:1-17).