

1 John 1:5-10

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Date: 21 April 2024

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[0 : 00] Please do have 1 John open in front of you. The plan over the next two Sunday evenings, this evening and next Sunday evening, Lord willing, is that we will spend some time in 1 John, but we'll be thinking about the theme of assurance.

So we're going to move around the letter a bit. It isn't a kind of exposition per se. So open it up, page 1021, and I'll pray one more time as we come to this passage.

Father, please speak in these moments. Please help us to listen, that we might hear your voice and be changed. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Real isn't how you're made, said the skin horse. It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real.

Does it hurt? asked the rabbit. Sometimes, said the skin horse, for he was always truthful. When you're real, you don't mind being hurt.

[1 : 18] Does it happen all at once, like being wound up, he asked, or bit by bit? It doesn't happen all at once, said the skin horse. You become. It takes a long time.

That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily or have sharp edges or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby.

But these things don't matter at all, because once you are real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand. Those of you that know it, that's *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Marjorie Williams. What it's describing there is a kind of love and acceptance that every human heart longs for. Being loved and valued by another to the point that you become a better version of yourself, more real, more human.

And you become that irrespective of how you look. People in this city can only imagine how liberating that must feel. In our culture, the idea that we could be so loved that we don't mind being hurt feels like a pipe dream.

[2 : 37] Being accepted despite what you look like or what you can do. Being accepted for who you are. It sounds too good to be true. And yet that isn't just something that happens with kids' toys or in stories about kids' toys.

But it's what happens when we come to Christ. The promise of the Christian gospel is that in Jesus Christ we are loved and accepted by God.

And we belong. God's kingdom involves forgiveness for those who have failed. Acceptance for outsiders. And joy for all eternity.

For all and any who will enter. And the truth is we all want to be part of a community like that. The communities that we try and create.

All of them I think are striving for this. From families to friendship groups to teams. Even to gangs. They're all an attempt to create a place of acceptance and love where we belong.

[3 : 46] It's what we want. But the question that plagues us in each of those contexts. Even maybe just in our thoughts. Even in the back of our mind is. Whether or not we're really part of the group.

Do we really belong? Who's in and who's out are massive questions in our culture. And when it comes to God's kingdom. I'm afraid to say it's a little different.

We want to be sure that we're part of things. But how do we know that we really belong? Are we in or are we out? And as I say that's our question this week.

And Lord willing next in the evening. The question of assurance. It's not the question how can we know God. But how can we know that we know him? What this involves.

I think particularly as John presents it to us in his letter. Is first of all looking to God. But also looking at ourselves. Looking at the whole question from the perspective of God.

[4 : 53] And looking at it from our perspective. Looking to God. Looking to our own lives. And it is an important question. It's an important question I think for two reasons. There are two big dangers that threaten to mislead us.

The first is false assurance. And the other is a complete lack of assurance. On the one hand it's presuming that we're in the right with God. When in actual fact we should have no such confidence. This is possible. The Lord Jesus makes that clear at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven. On that day many will say to me Lord, Lord did we not cast out demons in your name.

And do many mighty works in your name. And then I will declare to them. I never knew you. Depart from me. You workers of lawlessness. Saying that you are a Christian doesn't make you a Christian.

Saying that you do things in the name of the Lord Jesus doesn't make you one of his disciples. By contrast it is also possible though for a true believer to struggle with doubt.

[5 : 56] Some of us may feel that very way this evening. We look inside ourselves and we see our sin and we wonder. We ask ourselves the question again. It may just be in the quiet place of our thoughts.

If I really belong to God. Why do I give in to this sin? And why do I keep giving in to it? And why do I seem to make so little progress?

So what we need to do. In order to think well about this. Is to navigate a course between these two ditches. The ditch on the one side of false assurance. The ditch on the other side of a lack.

Of assurance. Because the New Testament expects us to have assurance. The New Testament expects us to know that we know the Lord. If we do know him. God calls us in Hebrews 10.22.

To draw near in full assurance of faith. We come to God with full assurance. That we belong to him. And Jesus tells us in John chapter 6.

[6 : 57] We heard it a number of weeks ago when Paul was preaching. All that the Father gives to me will come to me. And whoever comes to me I will never cast out. But raise it up on the last day.

And John who wrote that gospel will tell us here in this epistle. In several different ways that God wants us to know that we know him. Turn forward please to chapter 5.

Flick over one page. Chapter 5 and look at verse 13. Why did you write this letter John? I write these things. 5.13. To you who believe in the name of the Son of God.

That you may know that you have eternal life. In the reading that we had at the beginning. There was again reference to this. Chapter 2 verse 5.

By this we may know that we are in him. John wants us to have confidence that we are loved. And that we are accepted. And that we belong to the living God.

[7 : 54] And all this I want to suggest in the context of a Christian life that is remarkably ordinary. In a world of internet preachers promising you your best life now.

I think this is an important point to make. We would rather like God to take us out of the ordinary. Who amongst us wouldn't want the struggles of everyday sin? Everyday temptation?

Who amongst us? What a great word. Victory. We are promised that by many internet preachers. And what they mean by that is that we can ride above all the struggles. There is a way to live the Christian life that is actually extra.

Ordinary. And we want that. In our hearts we would love that. And so these preachers will pray on that wish. But it seems that it is precisely that sort of thing.

That John is writing this letter to counteract in his context. In chapter 2 we see that there is a group who left the church. Chapter 2 verse 19. They caused real confusion.

[8 : 55] Because they claimed to have a deeper knowledge of God. And a special anointing of the Spirit. And John writes to reassure these Christians that they are genuine. They are the genuine article.

In all of the ordinariness of their Christian lives. They are the genuine article. And it's the other group. Chapter 2 verse 26. Who are. Look what he says. I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you.

The ordinary. Is normal. It is those who promise this super duper experience. Who are deceiving.

John is saying ordinary faith is proof actually that you are loved and you are accepted by God. And that you belong to him. And this is the reassurance that they need. It's the reassurance that we need.

And as I say tonight. I want to focus on where John grounds our assurance. The theological reasons he gives for us to have confidence that we are loved by God. That we belong to him.

[9 : 54] And he points to three realities. Here's the first. He points to our acquittal before God the judge. Our acquittal before God the judge.

The perfectly holy God. Who made us for himself. Requires us to love him with our whole heart. Soul. And strength. But we don't do that.

And we know we don't do that. And this is really the essence of the human problem. And yet in this letter. Like a broken record almost.

John keeps reminding his hearers that God has dealt with this problem. Chapter 1 verses 8 and 9. Have a look. If we say we have no sin.

We deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins. He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. And to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Look down a little further.

[10 : 54] Chapter 2 verse 1. My little children I am writing these things to you. So that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin. We have an advocate with the Father. Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins.

And not for ours only. But also for the sins of the whole world. Look over to the next column.

Chapter 2 verse 12. I am writing to you little children. Because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

And over the page. Chapter 4 verse 9. In this the love of God was made manifest among us. That God sent his only son into the world.

So that we might live through him. In this is love. Not that we have loved God. But that he loved us. And sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins.

I said it's like a broken record. But it's like a broken record. That plays the best bit of the song. Every time. I realize. Boys and girls records.

[11 : 56] It's a big plastic. It was a vinyl disc. That you used to put on a machine. That turned around. And you put a needle on it. And the needle would move across the track. And you'd scratch the record from time to time. And it would jump. And we'll play the same bit over and over again.

I'm glad we've cleared that up. It's like the broken record. Clicking back to your favorite bit of the song. All the time. Do you see the language? Justice. Forgiveness.

Propitiation. Turning away of anger. It is the imagery of the law court. With God as the judge. And humanity are on trial before him. And the due penalty for our sin.

Is death. So we're on death row. Before the judge. And the case against us. It is cast iron. If we say we haven't sinned.

If we try to argue that at all times. And in every way. We have loved God with all that we are. And we have loved others with the same love. He says we have deceived ourselves. The case against us.

[12 : 57] Is cast iron. But. Because Jesus took the death penalty. That we deserve. In our place. And because we are united to him by faith.

The divine judge turns to us. And he pronounces us. Not guilty. Not guilty. We know we're guilty. The judge knows we're guilty. Those who know us know we're guilty. And yet because Jesus Christ. Lived the life that we should have lived. He loved God the Father perfectly. He loved the world perfectly.

He died the death that we deserved. Because of this. The judge's hammer falls in our favor. He declares us not guilty. We are acquitted. We are free to go.

We have a clean record. God the bookkeeper. Has cleared our record. Last week I clicked on a file on my computer.

[13 : 58] That I hoped had some information in it. There were some documents that I was looking for. And I hoped they were in there. And I clicked. And it said this file is empty. If we were to go to the courts of heaven.

And find the big hard drive there. And search for our name. And click on that file. It says this file is empty. The record of our sins has been taken away.

But there's more to say. Do you see? The law court image actually stops short. Because in a human court. Acquittal is as far as the judge can go. But when it comes to the divine judge. When it comes to God the judge. He doesn't just declare us not guilty. He also declares us positively righteous. We're not just free to go.

But because our faith in Christ unites us to him. We are actually constituted a new person. Because the judge counts Jesus' righteousness to us. If you have put your faith in the Lord Jesus.

[15 : 04] All of this is yours. Although sinful. The ground of your assurance before God is your justification. Whereby he acquits you of all charges. And he counts you righteous in his sight.

He has really done this. Do you believe that? He has really, really done this. And what that means is. If for whatever reason.

It doesn't feel that way. For whatever reason in your experience. It doesn't feel that way. You look again to Christ. And his empty cross. And his empty tomb. And you say one word to yourself. Forgiven. That's what we sing. When Satan tempts me to despair. And tells me of the guilt within. Upward I look.

And I see him there. Who made an end of all my sin. Because the sinless savior died. My sinful soul is counted free.

[16 : 05] For God the just is satisfied to look on him. And pardon me. Assurance comes when you remember your acquittal before God the judge.

But it gets better. When we leave the law court. Walk out the doors of the law court. We find that we're actually welcomed into the family home.

The second reason for assurance. That John gives us. Is our adoption by God the Father. Chapter 3. Look at verse 1.

See what kind of love the Father has given to us. That we should be called children of God. And so we are. The reason why the world does not know us.

Is that it did not know him. Beloved. We are God's children now. Because we are united to Jesus by faith. All that is true of him is true of us.

[17 : 06] So God places us in his family. His royal family. Under his generous fatherly care. And as family members. We become heirs of a heavenly inheritance. Now can you see how this works with assurance.

When you're tempted to doubt. You remember. You remind yourself that you haven't just been allowed to leave the courtroom without charge. But you've been brought into a whole new family. You've been given a new name. Your old name was Adam. Your new name is Christ. Because you have a new father. And a seat around the family table. When you come to Christ.

You receive a whole new identity. A number of years ago. I read a book about a couple who. An American couple who adopted two orphans from Russia.

And in one of the chapters of the book. It's titled. Are they brothers? Brothers. The author said that when they brought the boys. They were three weeks apart in age. When they brought them home to the United States.

[18 : 10] People would ask the question. They'd be out and about. And people would ask the question. Are they brothers? And he would reply. They are now. And the person said.

Well you know what I mean. Are they really brothers? The guy would stand his ground. Yes. Yes. They're both our sons. So they are brothers.

And the reason that he made a point of this. Is because when those boys were adopted. They were given a new father. A new name. And they possessed all the privileges. Of being in their family. That's the way it works with adoption. And it is exactly the same. For our spiritual adoption. Into the family of God. He puts his name on us in baptism. We have a new identity.

And this means that while we may. From time to time. Behave like we're not part of the family. When we reject our father's authority. When we choose to sin. When we behave in a way that is inconsistent.

[19 : 07] With that identity. It doesn't stop us belonging. So when you're tempted to doubt. When you lack assurance. Perhaps because you've sinned again.

And maybe even in some dramatic way. And I'm not saying. That we should brush over. Or play down sin. Not at all. We'll say more about this next week. When we consider the assurance question. From our perspective. But even when you mess up.

Remember. That in your baptism. You were named for God. That your faith in Jesus Christ. Places you into a real family. And the church family. Are really your brothers and sisters.

In the Lord Jesus Christ. In that book. The author concludes the chapter. Are they brothers. By setting this belonging.

In its larger cosmic context. He says this. Our adoption. Is about the day. When the graves of this planet. Will be emptied. Isn't that a lovely image. The graves of this planet.

[20 : 05] Will be emptied. When the great assembly. Of Christ's church. Will be gathered. Before the judgment seat. On that day. The accusing powers. Will probably look at us. Once more.

Former murderers. And fornicators. And idolaters. And they may ask. One more time. So are they brothers. The hope. Of adopted children. Like my sons. He says. And like me.

Is that the voice. That once thundered. Over the Jordan. Will respond. One last time. They are now. Two reasons.

That assure us. Of the love. Of God. For us. Two reasons. That remind us. That we belong. Our acquittal.

Before God the judge. Our adoption. By God the father. And then finally. And more briefly. A third reason. John raises. The affirmation. Through God the spirit.

[21 : 01] Look over at three. Verse 24. Affirmation. Through God the spirit. 324. Whoever keeps his commandments. Abides in God. And God in him. And by this. We know.

That he abides in us. By the spirit. Whom he has given us. Chapter 4. Verse 13. By this.

We know. That we abide in him. And he in us. Because he has given us. Of his spirit. In our adoption. We receive the Holy Spirit.

Who assures us. That we belong to God. The apostle Paul. Makes much of this. In Romans chapter 8. Explaining how our spirit. And God's spirit. Testify together. That we are God's children.

The fact is. That our ability. To believe the promises of God. To believe that we have been acquitted. And to believe that we have been adopted. Into his family. Those. Our ability to believe that. Is always weak.

[21 : 57] And it's always fallible. But the spirit of God. Never makes a mistake. And he persuades us. That what we read in God's word. Is true.

Not just objectively true. But it is true. In our lives. As well. The Holy Spirit. Doesn't whisper new truths. In our ears. He takes the word. That he inspired.

He takes the visible words. Of the sacraments of baptism. And the Lord's Supper. That we celebrated this morning. The visible words. That he instituted. And he causes us.

To understand the covenant promises. Of God. And to believe them more deeply. And to believe that they apply to us. So in the words of the apostle Paul. The spirit helps us. In our weakness.

To know that we've been forgiven. And adopted by God. His witness. Enables us to be sure. That we belong. To him. Sometimes this road can be bumpy.

[22 : 55] Satan tempts us to despair. That's why the hymn writer writes those words. That's why when we sing it. We go. Yep. That's true. Satan tempts us to rehearse old sin.

Things that we said and did. Even many years ago. They come out of nowhere. Back into our heads. Satan loves to sow doubt. In the minds of God's children.

But God is more powerful than Satan. And he's more powerful than you. And your sin. So when you hear.

And when you see his promises. His spirit causes you to believe them more deeply. And to trust them more surely. That is why gathering for worship. Is such a vital element of the Christian life.

It is where we see. And where we hear those promises most clearly. Lord's day by Lord's day. And of course sometimes. We do trust through a process. Of wrestling with these promises.

[23 : 53] For a time. Sometimes we struggle with the promises. And we struggle with God's providence in our lives. But it's the Lord who keeps you in the struggle. Why do you not give up?

Why do you keep wrestling? It's because God's spirit is keeping you in the fight. But when you're reminded of God's promises. That you belong to him.

And you believe them as the word of your father. This is the spirit granting you the assurance of his children. There are three beautiful truths that cause assurance to rise up.

Within acquittal, adoption, and affirmation. And I want to remind you that the key thing here is. That the reason assurance flows from these things.

Is because they don't rest on our effort in any way at all. Our salvation. Our belonging to God is the sovereign work of his hand.

[24 : 53] And you can be assured that your salvation is real and effective. Because it was all accomplished outside of you and your efforts. And this is a uniquely liberating aspect of biblical Christianity.

In every other faith. You can't be fully assured of your salvation. Because salvation is always partly based on your works. And your works can always let you down.

But the reformed tradition has always held that salvation is the work of God. Start to finish. And that means that nobody can destroy it. Not even you. The believer can have their assurance shaken.

Yes. The Lord can work in our lives in all kinds of ways. That can cause us to worry and to doubt. And all these kinds of things.

But because of the objective work of Christ. As the confession tells us. We are, quote, Never utterly destitute of that seed of God and the life of faith.

[25 : 56] That love of Christ and the brethren. That sincerity of heart and conscience of duty. And all of this. Regardless of how you feel.

Our security, as John Murray says, Does not rest on the stability of the assurance the believer entertains of that security. The security resides in the faithfulness of the Savior.

Your ability to cross a bridge doesn't rest on your belief that the bridge will hold you. It rests on the strength of the bridge.

And so it is with Christ. And so it is with Christ. Your assurance doesn't rest on your belief that Christ will hold you.

It rests on Christ. And when you trust in His finished work, you have been acquitted. At the bar of divine law. You've been adopted into the family of God.

[26 : 54] And because the Spirit testifies to this reality, you have the right to believe that you are real. And you really belong to God. And you really belong to God forever.

Let's pray together.