

**Abiding in Love**  
**1 John 4:15–21**  
**July 9, 2017**

The Apostle John treats assurance of salvation as a lively, conscious, and growing experience. He never looks at it as a decision that we make. Nor does he relegate assurance to reciting a prayer or raising a hand or making some kind of public decision to receive it.

He saw assurance of salvation as integral to our walk with Christ. Just as our walk is not static, neither is our assurance. It's not a state of being but a lively experience of knowing Christ. While the believer's walk goes through highs and lows, mountains and valleys, times of evident progress and times when progress seems to be a snail's pace, assurance that we belong to God through Christ accompanies Christians to give encouragement to keep pressing on. If our assurance is lacking or diminished then it directly affects the way that we walk with Jesus.

In the letter's setting, John writes on assurance due to everything appearing to come unglued around the Ephesian congregation. The group that had pulled away from the church likely claimed superior spiritual insight and better knowledge and even loftier experiences than those remaining in the church (1 John 2:19). Were they right? In that unsettling atmosphere, John takes the believers through a journey on assurance that we belong to Christ. They were despondent because of what happened and nothing could raise their hearts to keep pressing on more than the certainty that they belonged to Christ.

Here the Apostle doesn't break new ground as much as he retraces what he's written. *Assurance of salvation grows in the love relationship with God and His people.* How is that worked out into the realities of life? Let's think about it.

## **I. Reiteration of the evidences of assurance**

There are certain truths that we need to hold fast as we live out the Christian life. Instead of trying to come up with new methods for living as Christians, we're to learn to remain steadfast in what God has spoken in His Word. These truths are plain.

### **1. Confession of Jesus**

John writes, "**Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.**" Quite correctly, John Calvin notes, "*Faith* and *confession* are used indiscriminately in the same sense" [*Calvin's Commentaries*, 22:244, italics original]. So they are interchangeable in John's use. While I would add that the use of "**confesses**" might convey some kind of verbal agreement, such as openly declaring Jesus as Lord, yet even more, to confess something means to agree together. So what is the confession that we are we agreeing together? "**That Jesus is the Son of God.**" Does that mean that if someone just says those words, 'Jesus is the Son of God,' that there is a magical transference of divine power causing God to abide in him?

It seems that in the non-thinking, instant success mentality of our day, some would adhere to that kind of hocus-pocus version of Christianity. But confessing that Jesus is the Son of God means that *we agree together with the apostolic declaration concerning Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

What did the apostles declare? John has just explained in verses 9, 10, and 14 the apostolic declaration that God manifested His love by sending His unique Son as the propitiation for our sins so that we might live through Him. And He did this to accomplish the far-reaching saving work as Savior of the world. To confess Him as the Son of God, we're acknowledging that He is God, the second Person in the Godhead, who was sent by the Father to enter into the human race as a real person through the virgin's womb. Living a sinless life, He went to the cross and took on Himself our condemnation and God's judgment against us because of our sin. There He died, and in that death, He finished the saving act necessary to deliver us from judgment, atone for our sins, and bring us into relationship with God. His death became our death; His righteousness became our righteousness. Having satisfied eternal redemption, God raised Him from the dead, showing that He conquered sin, death, and Satan on our behalf. His resurrection is the divine template for the future bodily resurrection of all who have trusted in Christ.

John reminded us in 3:23 in the singular commandment that the way of assurance is found in believing in the name of God's Son Jesus Christ and loving one another. So we're told to believe Christ, and in believing or agreeing together with the apostles and Christians throughout the ages concerning this Christ, **"God abides in him, and he in God."** His life lives in us. Assurance doesn't happen because we pray "a prayer of assurance" or raise our hand in an emotional time of need. But it does come when we confess with the apostles, **"Jesus is the Son of God."**

Assurance rests in God's promise in the gospel.

## 2. Abiding in love

The second prong in the way of assurance has to do with loving one another (3:23). So John returns to it again. **"We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us."** The two verbs, *to know* and *to believe*, convey a point at which the gospel became clear and we believed, and there's no turning back from Christ; there's no other experience or spiritual exercise that improves on knowing and believing the love that God has for us in Christ. It's a settled knowledge and faith in God through Christ, which John here pictures as **"the love which God has for us."** That's critical because our loving others or abiding in love is to always mirror the self-giving, sacrificial, intentional love of God in Christ. The love that God has for us is found preeminently in Him sending His Son to satisfy divine justice against us because of our sin (v. 10). We cannot understand this love of God without seeing it in Him sending His Son. And when we do see that and believe (confess), it changes us and everything about us.

The idea of abiding in love is not the cause of that love but the fruit of relationship to God (4:7). So John writes, **"God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him."** This abiding in Him who is love means that He who is love also abides in us. The wellspring of love in God Himself works into and out through our lives as believers. Relationships change. We love the God that we didn't before; we love those redeemed by Him when we didn't really give them a thought before. The love doesn't arise from some feeling of altruism in us but rather because **"God is love,"** and that **"God abides in him."** The evidence of loving others points to God's indwelling love through Christ.

### 3. Indwelling Spirit

“**God abides in him, and he in God**” happens through the indwelling Holy Spirit. That’s why John has just told us, “By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, *because He has given us of His Spirit*” (4:13). Earlier he wrote, “We know by this that He abides in us, *by the Spirit whom He has given us*” (3:24). The indwelling Spirit makes Himself known when He comes to live in us at the new birth. Consciousness of His indwelling encourages us in the way of assurance.

Could someone come to live in your house without you knowing it? I’m not trying to creep you out, but wouldn’t you hear footsteps overhead? Wouldn’t you hear the shower running? Wouldn’t there be at least a muffled phone conversation or tap-tap-tap on the computer keyboard or sound of a hummed song? Wouldn’t you run into that new resident on the stairs or going out the door? Wouldn’t you see a slice of that delicious pie missing that you had in the refrigerator?

Even more, we would know if someone came to live *in us*. That’s just the point that John makes. That word “**abide**” means to *live in*. It’s the same term used when Jesus told Zacchaeus to come down from the tree because “today I must stay [abide] in your home” (Luke 19:10). God has come to dwell within us by the Holy Spirit. And He’s not just a temporary guest but a permanent resident. He’s not quiet either! He fills the house with joy over contemplation of the gospel. He grieves over our sin. He motivates and encourages us in the path of obedience, service, and gospel witness. He speaks into our lives in weakness and gives us a word when needed to speak truth in a conversation. He prompts us to reach out to someone in need. He enables gospel truth to so affect us that we worship as we gather with the body. He causes us to delight in the fellowship of His people.

And so we abide in love because He is love in every expression of His actions toward us. Our indwelling resident will not tolerate a loveless life.

But is this attention to assurance so necessary?

## II. Explanation for the necessity of assurance

Some groups teach that we cannot know for certain that we’re saved. I can think of many interesting discussions that I’ve had through the years with those who deny assurance. One can only wonder how they can deny assurance if there’s a biblical understanding of the nature of sonship—being called “children of God” or the effectiveness of Jesus Christ’s redemptive work—that He declared, “It is finished!” or the faithfulness of God to His gospel promises—since He is the God who cannot lie (John 1:12; 19:31; Titus 1:1–3). And one wonders if they’ve read First John and reached their conclusion by rather odd, unreliable methods of interpretation. We can certainly discuss and disagree about a lot of things in the Bible but one thing that is far too clear to deny is the assurance that God gives to those who trust in His Son.

Yet having stated that assurance is biblical and certain, the fact that John spent so much time addressing it, as did other biblical writers, let’s us know that assurance is not automatically experienced and grasped. There might be struggles along the way until we start to live in assurance. Those struggles might come due to harboring sin habits or neglecting the spiritual disciplines or sitting under poor, confusing teaching or neglecting the body of Christ as it gathers for worship and teaching or the adversary’s attacks or some crisis experience or some issue in background or culture or, as we’ve noted, due to

the way that we're emotionally and mentally wired. Regardless of what causes the struggle we must not roll over and play dead. *We need to pursue assurance.* It's our God-promised, Christ-purchased, Holy Spirit-endowed right to live in assurance. So if something hinders assurance then we need to consider how to walk in it consistently.

That's what John does. We see this in the phrase, "**By this,**" that indicates he's reaching back to what he's already written and pulling it forward into further explanation and application (e.g. 4:2, 9, 13). So he's reaching back to this reiteration of assurance in confessing Jesus because we know and believe God's love, loving others because He abides in us, and the witness of the Spirit as His divine indwelling.

Notice the purpose clause that follows, "**By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment.**" In other words, the reason we need love perfected, as he calls it, is so that we'll stand confidently before the Lord on the day of judgment. Now, think about that picture. We pass through this life and stand before Christ without anything to cover our flaws, failures, sins, disobedience, and lovelessness. We stand before Him who sees everything and who knows everything even before we answer His piercing questions. Brothers and sisters, that reality that we'll all stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10) staggers the imagination. But look what John tells us. He's reiterating the way of assurance in confessing Jesus, loving others, and the abiding work of the Spirit, pulling it forward to make application. Now he returns to love being perfected (4:12) because in that experience we have confidence in the day of judgment.

He gives us at least two reasons in this passage on why it is necessary for us to walk in assurance of our salvation.

### 1. Love hits its mark

Remember how we looked at "His love is perfected in us" in 4:12? We saw that it means that His love has come full circle in us, not that we've somehow reached a divine state of love. He loves us in sending His Son who goes to the cross to propitiate God regarding our sins. We believe the gospel and receive the life of Christ indwelling us by the Spirit so that we start reflecting that love in our relationships. We love God by loving others so that His love comes full circle back to glorify Him.

Now John takes it further. "**By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment.**" He's not speaking of perfectionism, a state in which we never sin again. He's already made it clear that we're sinners in need of the ongoing work of Christ (1:8–2:2). But by "**love is perfected with us,**" he means that *love has accomplished its purpose in us.* That's not a sign that we won't grow anymore in love or experience more depths of love (think of Paul saying that he had not arrived—Phil 3:12–13). But His love in us is doing what He intended it to do. It's not our love in action that completes us but rather, as the passive voice shows, it's God acting upon us to so affect us by His love that we're being changed. *God's love has hit its mark in us.* The love of God begins to affect and transform our relationships.

God has manifested His love toward us in sending Christ so that through what He accomplished on our behalf, "we might live through Him" (4:9). God's love has hit its mark so that His love is beginning to work its way into every facet of life. The reality of His saving work is evidenced by the way that love changes our relationships, giving us confidence before God now and in eternity.

## 2. Confidence in our standing

This “**confidence in the day of judgment**” doesn’t imply cockiness or give any cause for pride. It’s the assurance that God accepts us through Christ. God’s love hitting its mark is one aspect of this confidence. But John adds another layer, “**because as He is, so also are we in this world.**”

The “**He**” in that last clause refers to Christ [see I. H. Marshall, *NICNT: The Epistles of John*, 223]. “**As He is**” implies the way that the Father considers the Son. He is God’s beloved Son with whom God is well pleased. God accepts Him without reservation. There has never been one millisecond where the Son failed the Father or neglected the Father’s will. So confident was the Son at His pleasing the Father that He prayed, “I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (John 17:4–5). That’s how Jesus *is* in God’s sight.

But then John adds the clause: “**because as He is, so also are we in this world.**” Here’s the remarkable declaration that John makes in light of the day of judgment. *God looks at those Christ has redeemed as though He’s looking at His Son.* He accepts us in the same way that He accepts the Son who pleased Him at every point. Jesus’ standing is our standing with the Father. Therefore we have confidence on the day of judgment.

Imagine that picture as we look at ourselves and see so many flaws and fault lines. But what are we confessing when we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? We’re agreeing with John and Peter and Paul that God has accepted the righteousness of Christ in our place, that God has accepted the sacrifice of Christ as sufficient for our sins, and that God has welcomed us into His family as His own children. “**As He is, so also are we in this world.**” Even now, even “**in this world,**” with all of its opposition, we’re accepted by God as He accepts His Son. That’s our confidence—not in what we do or the level of our performance or how many rules we follow—oh no! Our standing is in Christ. When we live in that assurance it affects every detail of life.

## III. Corrections that lead to assurance

But we don’t rest in assurance easily. We fight it along the way because of a thousand little excuses that we put up against what God has done in Christ. We look at two.

### 1. The fear factor

Here are some struggles so that we cower in fear at the thought of standing before God. We’re afraid that God doesn’t love us because of things that we’ve done. We’re afraid that God’s love is like the faulty, fickle love that has disappointed us by family members time and again. We’re afraid that God doesn’t love us because we fail to measure up to His standards. We’re afraid that God will punish us instead of honor His gospel promise and forgive us. So how do we overcome fear?

*Let love hit its mark.* “**There is no fear in love; but perfect love [love that comes full circle; love that hits its mark] casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love [so love hasn’t hit its mark].**” Love that hits its mark casts out fear. How do we let love hit its mark? Plunge into the manifestation of God’s love in Christ (4:9–10, 14). That triple declaration of why God sent Jesus was not color commentary but central to understanding what brings us into this life of love.

Confess Him whom God manifested. Believe in His Son (3:23). Love will not hit its mark when we try to find satisfaction in other places.

*See love's origin.* **"We love, because He first loved us."** The love that casts out fear begins in His love for us and not ours for Him. John describes what it means to know Christ: **"We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us."** So turn from the self-attention, self-focus, and self-absorption that keeps us in fear before God. "If only I could do this . . . then God would accept me." "If only I were better then God would accept me." "If only I was not wired the way that I am then I could live in assurance." Here's the problem: *you are looking at you.* Love that casts out fear and lines the heart with assurance begins in Christ.

## 2. The relationship factor

So there's a new certainty: **"We love, because He first loved us."** Love is not a feeling but benevolent action mirroring His love. That's why it's contradictory to deny the corporate emphasis in living out the gospel. Christianity involves relationship to God and man. That's why withdrawing from the body for whatever reason chips away at our assurance. For it is in the process of believing Christ and loving one another that we find assurance (3:23; 4:15–16). Assurance is not sustained in a cave but in the active relationship of life in the body of Christ where the love that He has for us works out into love with others.

Talk of loving God is empty if we hate our brother. **"If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen."** As Calvin expressed it, ". . . how fallacious is the boast of every one who says that he loves God, and yet loves not God's image which is before his eyes" [CC, 22:249]. An unloving attitude and unloving actions toward Christ's body exposes a faulty relationship to God. We cannot love God without loving those around us that He has redeemed. In fact, as John implies, we love God by loving His people.

Here is the correction for the relationship factor: **"And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also."** If we do not recoil at this command it's a good indication that God's love is working in us and out of us. In it find deep longing and satisfaction. We may be afraid that we don't love God enough, and who does. But that fear attitude is corrected, as we love Him by loving our brother. As we do, the certainty that we belong to Him so that we might have confidence in the day of judgment, grows and increases.