

1 John: Knowing That You Know Christ

Caleb Nelson | Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church | Fall 2019

Sermon 1, Knowing Christ Through Eyewitness Testimony, 1 John 1:1-5, 3:12, 4:14, 5:9

Proposition: While Peter emphasized knowing Christ through Scripture, John does not refer to Scripture but rather emphasizes the indispensability of knowing Christ through eyewitness testimony and ultimately through the testimony of God.

- I. John begins by appealing to eyewitness testimony to Christ's ministry, 1:1-5
 - A. John saw eternal life in Jesus' earthly ministry, vv. 1-2
 - B. John announces that eternal life in this letter, v. 3
 - C. John passes on the teaching he heard from Christ, v. 5a
- II. He refers to another part of the Bible only once, 3:12
- III. He appeals to eyewitness testimony that the Son is the Savior of the world, 4:14
- IV. He appeals to the ultimate witness of God Himself, 5:9
- V. The Point: Know Christ by Hearing Testimony About Him

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, last week we finished looking at 2 Peter together. There we saw Peter's great theme of growing in the knowledge of Christ, and his explicit and implicit teaching that we gain knowledge of Christ from the whole Bible. Peter quotes from or references every part of the canon, and he includes some explicit teaching on the source and power of Scripture. As we start John tonight, though, we'll see something different. John, too, focuses on the theme of knowing Christ, and specifically the theme of knowing that we know, knowing that we have eternal life in Him. John in this letter clearly focuses on knowing Christ not so much through Scripture in general as through eyewitness testimony in particular. The point, as in Peter, is that you and I need to know Christ and to know that we know Him. The way to know that is through the testimony of the eyewitnesses that saw His ministry. Listen to them to know your Savior.

I. John begins by appealing to eyewitness testimony to Christ's ministry, 1:1-5

The letter before us opens with reference to what the author and his associates had seen, handled, touched, and then proclaimed. What exactly was that? It was Jesus' earthly ministry. I know that many readers are struck with the impression that John is talking about Christ in general. But think about the Arian controversy that erupted in the early church. The gospel of John says that the Word already existed "in the beginning." The Arians, though, would have no objection at all

to saying that the Word was “from the beginning.” But we know that the Son of God is not “from” the beginning, but rather from the eternity before the beginning. Thus, the thing that was “from the beginning” is the disciples’ presence watching, looking at, and touching the tangible results of the ministry of Jesus Christ during His time on earth. That was from the beginning, just as Luke says at the start of Acts.

A. John saw eternal life in Jesus’ earthly ministry, vv. 1-2

What, then, did John see in Jesus’ earthly ministry? He tells us that his takeaway from three years in the physical presence of Christ, traveling with Him, leaning on Him at dinner, being the disciple that Jesus loved — his takeaway was eternal life. He saw that eternal life, and that life was revealed to him during his presence at the earthly ministry of our Savior.

Now, this is a theme that is very familiar to us Christians. Yet remarkably, it is only one of the many ways in which the New Testament announces to us the full meaning of our salvation. What is the specific quality of this phrase “eternal life”? What facet of the diamond of salvation does it particularly bring to our attention? It focuses our thoughts on the greater clarity of the New Testament revelation. Throughout Proverbs, of course, we have heard the refrain “keep my commandments and live.” We have seen that the path of life winds upward for the wise. But where in the OT have we seen the word “eternal” applied to human life? Only in Daniel 12, where it is the description of resurrection life. Even there, it is not yet thought of as a sort of life that we can already have now, in this age.

So John’s proclamation of eternal life is remarkable most of all for its greater clarity. It is not fundamentally a different kind of life than that promised to the wise Son — but it is a clearer description of that life. God’s life is eternal. We all know that. But that eternal life, which the end of 1 John makes clear is in one sense nothing but an alternate identity of Jesus Christ, should become ours — that is truly a revolutionary thought. You have the Son of God. You have eternal life. How do we know? Well, John is going to tell us several ways you can know. But right here, right off the bat, he says that you can know because he’s seen it. He saw eternal life. It was revealed to him by the Father. And it was revealed to Him in the person of the Son of God, and specifically in the earthly ministry of the Son of God. It was there, in the career of Jesus, that the life was made manifest.

John saw that life because he saw Jesus. How can you see eternal life from a temporal perspective? You can’t. But you can see eternal life simply by seeing Christ, for in Him was life, and that life was the light of men.

I’ve mentioned before the Ayn Rand character dying in the snow but yelling “I want to live!” Do you want to live? Is life something you desire? In one sense, life is the greatest good, for without it no other good is possible for you and me. A living dog is better than a dead lion. Life is what allows us to experience and possess any and every other good. It is not the greatest good objectively speaking; God is the greatest good. But the life of God can become yours through the work of Jesus Christ. John saw life at work in Christ, most particularly, I think, in the resurrection. He saw that Christ had been with the Father. And he saw that to know Him and to

live eternally were one and the same thing. John saw that. That's the point of his letter: You need to listen to the eyewitnesses and listen to what they saw in Christ so that you can know that you know Him, so that you can know that you have eternal life.

B. John announces that eternal life in this letter, v. 3

Let me say that again. This letter is John taking what he saw and heard during three years on the dusty roads of Roman Palestine with Jesus of Nazareth and passing that on to you.

Now, here's the problem: the letter doesn't actually tell us anything about those days, right? Where is a description of what it was like to lean on Jesus at dinner? Where is the description of what John did with Mary in the days after the crucifixion and ascension? Where is the description of what Jesus looked like, or sounded like, or what His favorite foods and colors were? Brothers and sisters, actually, the absence of those things is part of the point. John is telling us what he saw and heard, yes. But he's telling us those parts of it that are actually important for us to know. "John, what did you see as you walked with Jesus?"

John: "God is light. Love one another."

Us: "But we wanted to hear more cool stories!"

John: "You already have everything you need. You don't need anyone to teach you. You have the Holy Spirit. Walk in the same way that Jesus walked."

Brothers and sisters, do you see it? John is announcing the eternal life that's in Jesus Christ, and he's telling us how we can know that we have it. He's proclaiming to us what he saw and heard, and the most important thing he saw and heard is not whether Jesus was a superb comedian who excelled in stories about centurions and mule-drivers. Rather, the important thing he saw and heard is that eternal life for human sinners was manifested in Jesus' earthly ministry.

C. John passes on the teaching he heard from Christ, v. 5a

Specifically, then, his book is mostly going to focus on what he heard. He's all about passing on the truths he learned from Jesus. This is what I heard from Him, he tells us. Here it is: God is light. But don't you see it, brothers and sisters? Yes, like Peter taught we need the whole Bible to know Christ. And like John teaches, we need eyewitness testimony (which has been incorporated into the Bible) to know Him. Christ is eternal life, in the shorthand sense that He has life in Himself and gives it to everyone who asks such that they too will live forever. John saw that lived out and he heard that truth from Jesus' own lips, and so here he is passing it on to us.

He was there. He saw. He heard. And we know that his testimony is true.

II. He refers to another part of the Bible only once, 3:12

Contrast this focus on his own eyewitness testimony (and that of the other eyewitnesses with him, the "we" of the first five verses of ch. 1) with Peter's approach. Peter certainly insists that apostolic eye-witnesses and ear-witnesses should be listened to. But that is only one small plank in his platform, as he quotes from or makes reference to every part of the Bible — law, prophets, writings, gospels, and epistles. John only refers to eyewitness testimony. In only one verse of this letter does he mention anything from anywhere else in Scripture. He goes back to the beginning and reminds us about Cain, who murdered his brother. It's a powerful biblical example — and

actually, it's one of three times in the entire Bible that Cain is even mentioned outside Genesis 4. (The other two times are in Hebrews 11 and Jude.) He uses the example to remind us to love our brothers and that we should not be surprised if the world hates us. But the larger point is that John's focus on this letter is on his own eyewitness testimony. The only biblical reference in the book really highlights that this is not a work commending other scripture, but rather a work telling that the eyewitness report of the author, John the Apostle, is a major way in which we need to know Christ.

III. He appeals to eyewitness testimony that the Son is the Savior of the world, 4:14

John's final explicit appeal to his own eyewitness testimony is in 4:14. "And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world." John saw this. He saw the Son in the flesh, and he saw that the Son had been sent by the Father. More than that, he saw that the Son's particular mission was to save the world.

How is possible to be an eyewitness of divine actions like sending the Son and saving the world? Brothers and sisters, this is one of the amazing facets of the incarnation. One thing the coming of God the Son in the flesh means is that an ordinary mortal like John the son of Zebedee was able to be an eyewitness of divine actions. He saw God at work — not metaphorically, or hidden under human agency, but with the naked eye.

John says he solemnly testifies to this truth. He bears witness of it, in writing.

Do you believe his testimony?

IV. He appeals to the ultimate witness of God Himself, 5:9

Well, you see, John covers that too. Ultimately, the source of faith is the Holy Spirit. He is the only one who could know for sure the things that John has been claiming — things about what the Father and the Son did in eternity past, or whether Jesus really saved the world. He is the one who taught John the meaning of what he saw and heard. And He is the one whose testimony is decisive.

John himself says that whatever you want to think about his own testimony, God's testimony is greater. The preceding context makes it clear that the testimony of the Spirit is primarily what's in view here, though that of course cannot be separated from the testimony of the Father, whose witness is the one described in this verse. The Spirit bears witness, v. 7 says. So does the Father, says v. 9, because He has testified concerning His Son.

So how do the Father and the Spirit bear witness? John tells us that it's internal. That's what v. 10 says: The one who believes has the witness in Himself. How? Through the indwelling Spirit, who bears witness and who repeats the Father's testimony too. Brothers and sisters, ultimately this is the only way we can be sure of the truths of the faith. The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit is what persuades us to believe in Christ. Without the Spirit, we can't receive the truth. We can't understand the eyewitness testimony of John. Ultimately, God Himself is the greatest authority, and we could never believe something as profound as the truth that God has given us eternal life in His Son without actually being persuaded of it by the Holy Spirit, who bears witness along with the Father to who Christ really is and that He really is the Savior of the

world. “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1Co 2:14 ESV). But if you have the Spirit, then you can accept the truths to which He bears witness.

Brothers and sisters, this is not “fideism” or a faith in faith. It is not the statement that if you believe, then you will receive some kind of internal confirmation of the truth claims of Christianity, a la the famed “burning in the bosom” our Mormom friends experience. Historical faith, the belief that Jesus of Nazareth really existed, lived, died, and rose again, can come from simply reading the eyewitness testimony of John and the other apostles. But ultimately, saving faith, a deep-seated trust in the God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, can only come from the witness of God, which is infinitely greater than the witness of men.

Jesus describes that witness as hearing His voice and knowing that it is really His. In other words, the witness is intuitive. Just as you know your human mother’s voice intuitively, having heard it from the moment you had ears, so you know your Heavenly Father’s voice intuitively, having heard it from the moment you were born again. Yes, there are plenty of sincerely wrong people out there. That’s not the apostle’s point; he’s not dealing with that question. He not asking how we know they are wrong, but about how we know we’re right — or more precisely, how we know that we have eternal life. The answer is that we know we have eternal life because we have listened to the testimony of God. We don’t discount the eyewitness testimony of John; we give it its full weight. But we know that the bottom-line reality of this question is the testimony of God. If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. If the Father testifies that His Son really is the Savior of the world, then you know that you can trust Him and that in Him you have eternal life.

V. The Point: Know Christ by Hearing About Him

So what’s the point, my friends? The point, the reason John wrote this letter, is so that you can know that you have eternal life. That is, he wrote it so that you can know that you have Christ. How can you know that? By listening to the human eyewitness testimony of the apostle John, and by listening to the divine eyewitness testimony of the Father and the Spirit. How do you do that? By reading this book, and believing it.

Listening to John’s eyewitness testimony is a major and majorly important way in which you need to know Christ. That’s why we’re going to be looking at this book together for the next however many months. You already know that you need to grow in the knowledge of Christ through the whole Bible. Now learn that you need to grow in the knowledge of Christ through listening to the testimony of the Beloved Disciple, who saw Him, walked with Him, lived with Him. His verdict was clear: “We have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us.” So listen to John’s testimony. Seek to know the Christ who is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.