

Forever in the Grip of God

Without a Doubt, Part 8

1 John 5:18-20

In recent days we've been hearing a lot about insurance costs and crises . . . we've read articles about computer glitches that have left people without coverage; we've read about insurance companies unwilling to reinstate those who had been canceled out – and we're now hearing about how insurance companies may have to raise their rates for those who return.

And even for those who have insurance, you never know what's down the road.

I remember needing to make two different insurance claims from minor automobile accidents in the same year with different members of our family. I remember getting a letter in the mail from my insurance company and I can remember that rising feeling of panic as I read the letter . . . they were letting me know that while they weren't going to drop me – I had never missed a payment in decades – still, they made it clear that it was an ever-increasing possibility . . . they didn't want me to repeat that previous year . . . I was now at risk.

The subtle message came through loud and clear – “We're here for you when you get in an accident, just don't get into an accident. And if you get into more than one or two a year – two years in a row . . . we might not be here for you after all.

What if the gospel of Jesus Christ was like an insurance policy?

One author I was reading provoked my thinking along this line; he had been, in reality, only recently dropped by his insurance company because he had one too many speeding tickets. Throw in a fender bender in the same year and he ended up getting a letter in the mail informing him to seek coverage elsewhere.

This author imagined what Christianity would be like if our relationship with God was like insurance coverage.

He creatively imagined getting a letter from an agent at The Pearly Gates Underwriting Division.

Dear Mr. Smith,

I'm writing in response to this morning's request for forgiveness. I'm sorry to inform you that you have exceeded your quota of transgressions for the year.

Our records show that, since employing our services, you have erred seven times in the area of greed, and your prayer life is substandard when compared to others of like age and circumstance.

Further review reveals that your understanding of doctrine is in the lower 20 percentile and you

have excessive tendencies to gossip. Because of your sins, you are now considered a high-risk candidate for heavenly assurance.

You understand that grace has its limits. The Lord sends his regrets and kindest regards and hopes that you will find some other form of coverage as soon as possible.ⁱ

Sincerely,
Pearly Gates Insurance

P.S. You only thought you were in good hands!

In his closing comments to the early church, the Apostle John has intentionally, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, attempted to remove all doubts from the heart and mind of the believer.

Over and over again, he's stressed that there are things we can rest assured of – no matter what;

- we can know that we're forgiven;
- we can know that we're saved once and for all;
- we can know that God hears us when we pray –
 - and we can be certain that He will answer us in one of 4 ways: remember?
 - His answer might be “Yes”;
 - it might be “no”;
 - it might be “No, not that”;
 - or it might be “Not now.”

John has touched on some of the most critical issues that create doubt and concern in our hearts as believers.

And he wants to clarify what matters most in life.

In *First John chapter 5, verses 18-20* He summarizes several critical issues all over again.

In fact, you might go ahead and underline or circle in your Bible the phrase:

- in *verse 18* – “*We know*”;

- again in *verse 19* – “*We know*”;
- again in *verse 20* – “*We know*”
- and then in the *middle part of verse 20*, “*that we may know*”.

We know this is true - we know, we know, we know, we know!

In this final paragraph, John gives us at least 5 assurances – 5 things every believer can know for sure.

1. **First, we know that the believer no longer lives to sin**

Notice 1 John 5 and verse 18; We know that no one who is born of God sins.

Wait, let me read that again – “we know that no one who is born of God sins.” You're immediately wondering, “That's reassuring?”

Last I checked, I was still sinning . . . in fact, the older I am in the Lord the more aware of how sinful I am.

What does John mean – no one who is born of God sins?

Some believe – perfectionists and some Arminian's believe **Christians can lose their salvation** by sinning and this text is the proof that you never really were born again because you sinned. So that must mean you lost whatever salvation you thought you had.

This is your letter from God . . . “We're sorry to inform you that you've been dropped.”

There is another view that the Christian can gradually overcome sin until they become completely sinless.ⁱⁱ

Christians eventually stop sinning.

I've had people over the course of my ministry tell me that this is who they are; they no longer intentionally sin as proof of their conversion.

If they commit a wrongdoing, well, it's just an unconscious mistake; or it's an impulsive action without premeditation – so it doesn't qualify as sin.

These people are simply attempting to gain some kind of assurance in light of verse like this that – to

the English reader – seems to be clear – Christians don't sin.

Keep in mind that John has already told us in *chapter 1 and verse 8* that anybody who says they no longer sin is deceiving themselves.

There is still another view holding to the opinion that your sin nature sins but not your new nature. There may be some truth to that, but nowhere in the Bible are you allowed off the hook by saying, “Well, that was my unregenerate flesh doing that, not the new me, so I'm not responsible.”

How many times have you heard somebody caught in a crime and say, “That wasn't me – that wasn't who I am . . . that really wasn't me.”

That's convenient, isn't it? In fact, that view turns liberty into license – the flesh will do whatever the flesh will do, right? Boys will be boys . . . so don't get so bent outta shape over it.

The truth of scripture is that while our fallen flesh – our fallen minds and bodies – are definitely sinful, every believer is responsible for their sinful actions.ⁱⁱⁱ

Otherwise, we wouldn't need scripture on subjects like discipline or confession or forgiveness.

Another view of this verse says that **John is presenting to us an ideal that we ought to strive toward.** Let's do our best to never sin again. Even though Christians can't be perfect, we ought to strive for perfection especially if we ever hope to feel any kind of assurance.

That's a worthy goal, but John is tying sinlessness to salvation here.

If you are born of God – literally, born out of – sourced out of – born by means of God – well, if that's you – then you don't sin.

So the question remains – how can you know for sure you *have eternal life* – *verse 13* – if now you discover in *verse 18* that you can only know you have been *born of God* if you don't sin anymore?

No wonder so many Christians are sitting in fear waiting for a letter to arrive from the Celestial Insurance Company saying, “We're sorry, but you

maxed out your sin quota . . . you've crossed the line . . . and you're going to get dropped.”

What John is saying here in this text is something he's already said in this letter. In *chapter 3* he wrote about those who practice righteousness and those who practice sin (*3:4*).

The meaning of *verse 18* is answer is found in the present tense of this verb. John is effectively saying, “no one who has been transformed by the new birth goes on living in an unbroken pattern of sin.”

The pattern now is sin and confession . . . sin and confession; the pattern of sinning without regret is now transformed into sinning with regret and a desire to live a holy life.

In other words, the true believer no longer lives to sin.

One author put it this way – it used to be natural to sin, but now that we've been born of God, it is unnatural to sin.^{iv}

We don't like it . . . we're troubled by our sinful nature and our acts of sin.

We long, like the Apostle Paul in *Romans 7*, to be freed at last from the wretchedness of our sinfulness.

In the meantime, we grow in thankfulness to our Lord who stands as our Advocate (*First John 2:1*) – and we need an Advocate because we continue to sin and need His intercession.^v

John is saying, the one born of God doesn't continually sin in an unbroken pattern. You could insert the word lifestyle. The one born of God does not have a lifestyle of sin.

He pursues a pattern of righteousness which is the mark of the believer instead of a pattern of unrighteousness which is the mark of the unbeliever.

The true believer longs to please his Lord.

Our greatest joy in life is pleasing Christ and our greatest sorrow is in sinning against Him. Paul wrote, “*My ambition in life is to be pleasing to Christ.*” *2 Corinthians 5:9*

We grieve that we grieve Him. We sorrow that we bring Him sorrow. We know that the believer no longer lives to continually sin.

2. Secondly, we know that the believer is guarded by Jesus Christ

I love the fact that on the heels of a phrase that could be troubling, John quickly adds this next statement of assurance – notice *verse 18b; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.*

But *He who was born of God* – this is now a reference to Jesus Christ.

Notice the difference in *verse 18* between *he who is born of God* and *He who was born of God*. John uses the same term for the believer being born spiritually as he uses for Jesus being born physically.

But John changes the tenses of the verbs for *being born* – for believers, he uses the perfect tense to refer to our new birth as believers; but for Jesus, he uses the aorist tense to refer to the birth of Jesus at a specific moment in time – a reference to the incarnation – a reference to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.^{vi}

I believe John is using a play on words here as well – it’s as if he’s saying, “For those of you who have been born spiritually into the family of God; the Son of God was born physically into the family of mankind.

Why? That’s the amazing promise here – John writes, *to keep you.*

To keep you!

The word John uses (τηρει) means to guard . . . literally, to stand guard like a sentry at his post.^{vii}

And John uses the present tense to reassure us that Jesus never goes off duty. He continually preserves the believer and stands guard over him.

Nothing can happen to us without first passing by our Great Guardian.

John carries forward with that idea as he writes next in verse 18, and the evil one does not touch him.

The evil one does not touch the believer.

John uses the definite article as he refers to *the* evil one.^{viii}

He’s not talking about your neighbor or your boss or your gym teacher – he’s actually talking about Satan himself.

The Evil One can’t touch you.

It’s helpful to know that this word translated “touch” is a word that means *to lay hold of – to fasten to.*^{ix}

Literally, to grip.

One author said, the slimy fingers of Satan will never regain an abiding grip on the redeemed soul.^x

Satan would have to defeat Christ in order to regain his hold over your eternal future . . . and he has already lost you.

Your Champion is standing, guarding, victorious and will be so until the end of time and you are in His care.

Although Satan has been given delegated power and he certainly attacks the church and troubles the believer and tempts the Christian and foments hatred for all the believer stands for – and he will persist until he is ultimately judged and condemned to hell for ever, even still he will **never regain his grip** on any child of God.

Jesus Christ said of His followers, *I give eternal life to them and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand (John 10:28).*

There is no way your soul can slip from the hand of Christ, back into the hand of the Devil.

And listen, beloved – your security is not in *your* grip on Christ – but His grip on you!

And God will never lose His grip.

Now notice – almost with another play on words, John gives us a third truth we can know.

3. Thirdly, we know that the world is gripped by the Devil

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

In other words, the world system and all the unbelievers of this world system are under the power

– the dominating influence – the mastery – of the evil one.

This is really a horrifying reality.

The world thinks it's free as a bird. The unbeliever thinks he's celebrating his freedom – when in reality, he is being seduced by the Serpent who is even now wrapping his coils about their hearts to crush them in the end.

The present-tense verb – *the world lies in the power of* – to lie in – literally means to recline.^{xi}

Get this – this word was used to show the imagery of a child on a parent's lap.^{xii}

Can you see it?

Some unsuspecting child, nestled there on their parents' lap who strokes the child's hair and smiles at them and says, "There, there . . . everything will be just fine."

Literally, John is informing us that the whole world lies in the lap of the evil one.^{xiii}

He's called the world's god (2 Corinthians 4:4) He's referred to as the world's prince (John 1:13)

The whole world – the whole kosmos (κοσμος) – John writes, the whole entirety of human affairs apart from submission to God – it's economics; it's politics; it's finances; it's education; its entertainment and above everything else, it's religions.^{xiv}

All of it, apart from God is actually reclining in the lap of Satan who strokes it and massages and manages and encourages and influences it with his reassuring message, "There, there . . . everything will be just fine."

God has called the believer to effectively infiltrate the fallen systems of our world and deliver the truth. So that in education and politics and technology and finances and business and in every arena of life,

- we represent the truth;
- we warn the world of its eternal peril

I'll never forget reading about a family who was vacationing in the San Isabel National Forest in Colorado. They actually lived nearby and had driven into this beautiful area for the afternoon.

They had brought a picnic lunch and they eventually spread their blanket out underneath the branches of a large tree . . . they ate at their leisure . . . enjoying the scenery and the beauty around them.

When they were ready to leave, they decided to take a picture. Dad set up the camera on his tripod and set it for a timed exposure; he ran back under the branches of that tree where he and his family faced the camera and smiled.

A few weeks later, when they got the pictures developed and returned, their blood froze . . . they nearly fainted; because they could just make out through the leaves, a mountain lion lying on a branch not more than 10 feet above their heads.

They had no idea the danger just a few feet above them.

The Christian understands this truth. That's why we must be passionate about our mission . . . we're telling people – whether it upsets their picnic or not – they are in danger . . . they need to move their blanket . . . they really need to run to safety.

You see, the Christian,

- represents the truth;
- warns the world of its eternal peril
- restricts evil and slows decay;
- brings reform wherever possible
- delivers the gospel and
- shines as lights.

When do you begin to shine where God has placed you?

When does a candle begin to shine? As soon as it's lit and placed in a darkened room.

Just as much as we know that we no longer live to sin. Just as much as we know that Christ is our guardian. We also know that the world is right now reclining in the very lap of its deceiver.

John goes further – number 4.

4. We know that Jesus Christ has opened the believers eyes

Verse 20. And we know that the Son of God has come.

By the way, that verb *to come* is present tense with a perfective sense, Greek scholars tell me as I read their translation work.

Which is fascinating to learn because John is literally saying, “He has come and is still here!”

Yes, He ascended and sent the Spirit down.

But Christ, being omnipresent God is capable of keeping His promise He delivered to His apostles and to us – I am with you always, even unto the end of the age. (Matthew 28:20)

Always!

Literally, all the days. Jesus Christ is with us all the days – good days and bad days; days of joy and days of sorrow; days of victory and days of defeat.

I will never leave you nor forsake you, Jesus promised in Hebrews 13:5.

Did you notice as well here – John writes that Jesus Christ has ***given us understanding***. He’s opened our eyes, once blinded by the god of this world, Satan, in unbelief.

But now our eyes have been opened.

Like John Newton the hymn writer declared with such great joy concerning the grace of God –

*I once was blind, (say it with me) but now I see,
Was lost but now am found.*

Now notice further ***in verse 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.***

Did you notice the threefold use of the word true?

It’s one of John’s favorite words. Alethinos (αληθινος) which can be translated authentic . . . real.^{xv}

Let’s go back and read it with the word authentic and real – and you can see the Apostle John taking one last swipe at false teachers in verse 20. ***And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is authentic and real; and we are in Him who is***

authentic and real – in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the authentic and real God.

This is one of the most stunning, clear, undeniable statements of the deity of Christ you’ll find in the New Testament.

And another reference to the concept of a Trinity. Although the Spirit of God isn’t mentioned, here you have God the Father mentioned – ***His Son, Jesus Christ.***

And then this statement that ***Jesus Christ is the true God.***

Here you have again a reference to the doctrine of the Trinity. The real God – the God of the whole Bible – is one God, existing in three Persons.^{xvi}

They are equal in essence – equally divine, yet subordinate in function.

Just as a dad and a mom and a child are equally human, they have functions that include subordination.

So Jesus the Son does the will of the Father and the Spirit exalts the ministry of the Son.

Yet throughout the New Testament, just in case we might miss the equality of essence between these three persons of the Godhead, we’re shown that titles are shared between them.

- The Son is called God in John 1:1
And the Word was God.

The only way Jehovah witnesses can get around that verse is to add the word “a” in their translation – so that it reads, The Word was with God and the Word was a god.

Oh no . . . and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us and we beheld His glory. (John 1:14)

- Jesus is called the blessed God (Romans 9:5)
- The great God (Titus 2:13)
- And then the Holy Spirit is called God (Acts 5:3-9)
- And He’s also called Lord (2 Corinthians 3:17 & 18).

And now here in *First John* – perhaps one of the most striking, irrefutable texts of all, Jesus is called the true – the authentic – the real God.

John is taking one last swipe at the Gnostics who denied the deity of Jesus and the humanity of Christ. They were teaching that Jesus was just a man and Christ was just some sort of spirit consciousness.

But John bundles it all up together in one powerful phrase here – Jesus is Christ and Christ is Jesus and Jesus Christ is God.

When Arius was teaching in the 4th century the first organized heresy, since repackaged in Mormonism and The Jehovah’s Witnesses and others that Jesus wasn’t singularly and uniquely God in the flesh, a pastor and church leader by the name of Athanasius battled him in debate and in writing.

Athanasius defended the deity of Jesus Christ and his key text was First John 5:20. He challenged Arius to prove grammatically and textually that John the Apostle wasn’t clearly declaring the deity of Christ.

Arius failed in the end and the early church clarified its doctrinal view that Jesus Christ was indeed equally God, as was God the Father and God the Spirit.^{xvii}

But don’t miss it – John is clearly telling us that only Jesus Christ can open your eyes, and give you understanding to believe that truth – apart from Jesus Christ you’ll never buy it.

You’ll stay blinded in unbelief, reclining on the lap of the evil one who strokes your hair and says, “There now . . . don’t get all worked up about that . . . it really doesn’t matter.”

Oh, it matters.

5. In fact, the fifth and final thing we are told that we can know is that Jesus Christ is the source of everlasting life.

When you believe in Jesus Christ, you get eternal life. We know from the record of scripture that

everyone will live forever – those who do not believe in Him will one day get their wish and will live forever separated from Him in terrifying judgment.

But those who receive Him will live forever in unique and everlasting joy.

We’re not just going to live forever. We’re going to live with Him.

We are in His grip now . . . we will see Him in His glory then.

In the meantime, He guards us . . . He guides us.

One theologian wrote, “I am graven on the palms of His hands; I am never out of His mind. All my knowledge of Him depends on His sustained initiative in knowing me. I know Him because He first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when His eye is off me, or His attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when His care falters. This is momentous knowledge. This is tremendous relief in knowing that His love is utterly realistic, based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery now can disillusion Him about me, in the way I am so often disillusioned about myself. This is unspeakable comfort . . . in knowing that God is constantly taking knowledge of me in love and watching over me for my [ultimate, spiritual and eternal] good.”^{xviii}

And listen, no other God – here’s the implication of John’s point – no other God can fulfill this throughout your life – no other God can then give you eternal life, eternal joy, eternal bliss, eternal satisfaction on anyone but this God – the authentic God – the real God – Jesus Christ.

With that, John puts our fears to rest . . . we not only know the true and living God, but we are forever in the grip of His hand.

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- i Adapted from Max Lucado, Sons & Daughters (Zondervan, 2012), p. 40
- ii John MacArthur, 1-3 John (Moody Publishers, 2007), p. 121
- iii Ibid, p. 121
- iv Roy L. Laurin, First John: Life at its Best (Kregel, 1987), p. 184
- v MacArthur, p. 206
- vi Robert Lightner, The Epistles of John & Jude (AMG, 2003), p. 81
- vii Herschel H. Hobbs, The Epistles of John (Thomas Nelson, 1983), p. 140
- viii Hobbs, p. 140
- ix D. Edmond Hiebert, The Epistles of John (BJU Press, 1991), p. 267
- x Ibid
- xi Hiebert, p. 267
- xii Hobbs, p. 141
- xiii Lightner, p. 82
- xiv MacArthur, p. 209
- xv Adapted from James Montgomery Boice, The Epistles of John (Baker, 1979), p. 148
- xvi John Philips, Exploring the Epistles of John (Kregel, 2003), p. 184
- xvii Adapted from Hiebert, p. 271
- xviii J.I. Packer, quoted in Charles R. Swindoll, The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart (Word Publishing, 1998), p. 236