

This is No Picnic

Postcards from John, Part 6

2 John 8

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

Running the race that God has set before us is a battlefield. We often desire our Christian life to be as comfortable and enjoyable as a picnic in the park, but the Apostle John writes to remind the reader that it is indeed a battlefield. We are to watch ourselves in order to avoid losing what we have accomplished for Him.

Discussion Points:

Believers are to press on to maturity. We are to fight in the battle against losing what we have already accomplished. We are to watch and be alert.

- Does it surprise you that we are in a battle to retain where we have grown in the Lord? Why or why not?
- What are ways, situations, or temptations that can cause a believer to backslide?
- When are the times it is most difficult to fight the battle? What are some biblical strategies to utilize when our defenses are lowered?

False teachers and false teachings are still alive and well in our culture today.

- Why do you think so many passages of scripture are devoted to warning about false teachers and false teachings?
- What happens to growth in Christ when a believer strays into false teaching?
- How are believers to treat the truths the Holy Spirit has entrusted to us?

God has not only freely offered His amazing grace through salvation in Jesus Christ, but He has generously promised rewards for those who have lived faithfully for Him.

- How does knowing you are saved by grace and not by works impact your daily life?
- In what ways does knowledge of future rewards help you live in obedience in the here and now?
- How do future rewards and false teachings affect one another?

Discussion Guide Cont.

Gospel Connection:

Jesus, our only way to reconcile with God, will one day be the rewarder of those who have believed and lived lives on earth for Him. He will one day bestow on His faithful the statement believers long to hear, "Well done"!

Practical implications:

Think: Am I living my Christian life alert and watchful against false teaching as though I am in a battle? Can I see areas where I can be more vigilant?

Pray: Praise God for inspiring the words of scripture to help us live a victorious life in Christ and for generously seeking to reward those who are faithful. Ask for Him to open our eyes to false teachings that may hinder our maturity or cause us to backslide.

Do: Watch that you do not lose that which has been accomplished for Him in your life in order that you may receive your full reward.

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It took place on a bright, sunny, Sunday afternoon. The thought of having a picnic seemed to capture the imagination of not only families, but the entire town of Washington, D.C.

Hundreds of people packed their picnic baskets, loaded their families into their carts and buggies and took off for the countryside.

What was so unusual about this Sunday afternoon drive was where everyone intended to unpack their lunch; if you can believe it – the picnic was planned near a battlefield.

The date was July 21, 1861. People from Washington rode their horses and buggies to Manassas to watch their Union soldiers bring an end to what they considered to be a short rebellion. And they actually unfolded their blankets, ate their chicken sandwiches, and prepared to cheer from a distance.

One soldier described them as “a throng of sightseers . . . they came in all manner of ways, some in stylish carriages and still others in buggies, on horseback and even on foot . . . it was Sunday, and everybody seemed to have taken a general holiday”.

A reporter from the London Times was there and he wrote, “The spectators were all excited, and a lady with an opera glass . . . was quite beside herself at the sound of an unusually heavy discharge of cannon; she said, “Oh my, is that not splendid?”

It wasn't long before reality rushed in. With the sound of combat, the sight of blood and the screams of wounded soldiers, people soon realized this was no picnic. Fathers grabbed up their children and husbands called for their wives. They jumped into their wagons and onto their horses. One reporter noted that they were caught in a stampede of retreating Union soldiers – in fact, one spectator, a congressman from New York, was caught by

Confederate soldiers and kept prisoner for nearly six months.

And that was the last time onlookers took picnic baskets to a battlefield. Or was it?

Is it possible that the average church and the average Christian are making the same mistake? Do we embrace, in reality, the false assumption that Christianity is more like a picnic, than a battlefield?ⁱ

The Apostle Paul warned the believers living in Ephesus that they were in a battle – as one author paraphrased it, this was not an afternoon athletic contest – or in my own words, this is no picnic.

Phillips and Peterson paraphrase this classic text in *Ephesians 6* to read:

In conclusion, be strong—not in yourselves but in the Lord, in the power of his boundless resource. Put on God's complete armor so that you can successfully resist all the devil's methods of attack. For our fight is not against any physical enemy: it is against organizations and powers that are spiritual. We are up against the unseen power that controls this dark world, and spiritual agents from the very headquarters of evil. (*J.B. Phillips*)

So take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. This is no [picnic] that we'll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours.

You're up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued – truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words.

Learn how to apply them. You'll need them throughout your life. God's Word is an *indispensable* weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other's spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out. (Eugene Peterson)

I love the way that concludes . . . keep your eyes open . . . and keep each other's spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.

That's exactly the heart of the old Apostle named John. If anybody gets it – he gets it.

- this formerly exiled, persecuted, persevering church planter & pastor;
- this original disciple who was the only one of the twelve original disciples courageous enough to stand there at the cross while his Savior died;
- he was one of the first to arrive at the tomb and see the cocoon shape of the grave clothes lying on that stone shelf inside the tomb – wrapped linens without a body inside them – and seeing that sight, the scriptures tell us . . .
- he became the first of the 12 disciples to believe the resurrection of Christ had taken place;
- he would be the disciple to live the longest and suffer the longest;
- he would see some of his fellow disciples executed and the early church scattered, bloodstained and weary.

And now he writes one of his last letters, preserved for us in scripture . . . he writes to warn an unnamed lady that Christianity is not a picnic . . . it's a battlefield . . . so keep your eyes open and ready to engage in the ongoing battle between truth and error; darkness and light.

Let's go back and rejoin our study at *verse 8* where John writes –

Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward (2 John 8).

Watch yourselves could be rendered, “Look out!” and put an exclamation point after it. “This is one of only three imperatives in the entire letter.”ⁱⁱ

Watch out! This is not a polite suggestion – it's an emphatic warning to keep your eyes open to the false teacher and your ears alert to false teaching.ⁱⁱⁱ

Watch your step! The verb is *blepo* which means to observe accurately – to contemplate earnestly – to keep your eyes open.^{iv}

Why? John points out at least two reasons for this woman and her children and every believer since to keep our eyes open.

Two reasons to keep your eyes open:

Number 1:

1. So you don't lose forward progress in maturity

Notice again, John writes, ***that you do not lose what we have accomplished.***

John is talking about losing forward progress in growth. We tend to call that backsliding. Whatever you call it, you're not moving in the right direction.

That you do not lose – the pronoun *you* is plural – John no doubt includes this woman's children, as well as the church family that more than likely meets in her home and will be shared the contents of this letter – her home, which is the place where false teachers are wanting to gain an audience.^v

So look out – why? Because false teaching can lead an individual Christian astray and into misguided activity and it can lead the church into division and distraction and the loss of fruitful ministry.

None of us should ever consider ourselves beyond the reach of false teaching.

Watch yourselves, that ***you*** do not lose what ***we*** have accomplished . . .

Would you notice the change from ***you*** to ***we***. ***That you do not lose what we have accomplished.***

John doesn't want this woman or her family or her church to waste all the work accomplished by himself and the spiritual

leaders. And church leaders, by the way, think like that. We agonize over that.

I've personally been involved in leading people to Christ, baptizing them, discipling them, spending hours with them only to see them become enamored with some aberrant teaching or some sinful temptation they got tangled up in or some dis-unifying distraction in the church they got caught up in and walked away and never regained the potential of their ministry and their testimony.

They literally lost ground in their maturity.

That's the concern of John the Apostle and he doesn't want to see it happen in this woman's life and her family as well as the church in which he has invested so much.

Phillips translates this phrase here in 2 John; "*Don't throw away all the labor that has been spent on you.*"^{vi}

Here's the warning: if you stray into false teaching, you're not only going to waste the work *you've* personally invested in our own life, in growing in the word and growing up in Christ, but you're going to waste the work invested *in you* by friends and Bible teachers and disciplers and parents and pastors.

This was the same concern of the Apostle Paul toward the Galatians who were being lured into false teaching, and he wrote, ***I fear for you that perhaps I have labored in vain over you*** (Galatians 4:11).

Now keep in mind that Paul, and John, aren't talking about someone losing their salvation – which isn't possible – in fact, John has already referred to this woman and her children as being in the truth (*v. 1*) and as those who belong to the truth forever (*v. 2*).^{vii}

John is concerned about her and us, backsliding . . . getting off track . . . ignoring God's word . . . choosing to be self-centered . . . choosing sin . . . hiding our testimony for Christ, refusing to serve others . . . and on and on.

This is the Apostle Paul writing;

- O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you (***1 Timothy 6:20***);

- guard through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which was entrusted to you (***2 Tim. 1:13***);
- continue in the things you have learned (***2 Tim. 3:14***) . . . don't stop . . . keep moving forward!

This isn't a picnic . . . this is a battlefield. And these are the two reasons you better keep your eyes open:

Two reasons to keep your eyes open:

1. So you don't lose forward progress in maturity.

And secondly,

2. So that you don't lose a full reward in glory.

Again, John isn't talking about salvation.

Let me pull over here for a moment and then I'll get back to my primary point here about rewards.

Let's make sure we separate saving grace from good deeds.

Salvation from sin, judgment and Hell is by grace through faith in Christ alone (***Ephesians 2:8-9***).

Salvation is actually initiated by God, since you are dead in your sins and cannot even begin to respond apart from His initiating gift of faith (***Ephesians 2:1-5***).

Salvation is the sovereign decision of a gracious God who, in eternity past, chose to love you and predestine you to become one of His own children (***Ephesians 1:4-5***).

Because God chose to love you first, you were brought to life by the hearing of the gospel so that you could then choose to love Him in return (***Romans 10:17 & 1 John 4:19***).

In fact, in John's gospel, he recorded Jesus saying, ***My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow me; I give eternal life to them and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one*** (John 10:27-30).

So to lose your salvation would mean that something God the Father planned from eternity past somehow didn't last.

It would mean that even though God saved you He couldn't hang on to you – that would mean that God's efforts proved to be futile.

He wasn't strong enough . . . He lost you after all . . . I guess something took you out of the sovereign hand of God who chose you, loves you, sent His son to die for you, gave you to His Son as a gift, redeemed you, indwelt you, but He still couldn't somehow manage to keep you?

No, God loses none of His own.

That was John's point earlier in his first letter about these false teachers – he wrote, who left us – they exited from among us – because they were not really of us . . . they weren't really believers.

They didn't lose their salvation, they never had it . . . no matter what they said, what they prayed or what they joined.

God loses none of His own.

So you don't do good things to get saved and you don't do enough good things so that God decides to keep you.

In fact, becoming a Christian is not a reward you deserve for cleaning yourself up.

Maybe you're thinking today that you'll become a Christian one day when you deserve it a little more . . . when you clean yourself up and make yourself a little more presentable to God . . . I mean how embarrassing would it be for God to save you when you're such a mess.

Are you a really bad sinner? That's great news, because he only died for sinners. He has chosen to redeem not one person who was good . . . but He only saves sinners who realize they'll never be good enough.

And He will save you, and keep you . . . not because you are good, but because of His grace.

You say, but how do I know if He'll save me . . . how do I know if I'm predestined for eternal life? How do I know that God chose me from eternity past? That's easy – have you chosen Him? He promised that ***whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*** (Romans 10:13).

In fact, when you get your theology in the right order, the fact that you called on Him is the evidence that He called you . . . you're one of His sheep . . . you've heard His voice, and you follow Him.

Now, back to my point.

Becoming a Christian has nothing to do with what you do for God, but behaving like a Christian has everything to do with what you do for God and one day, He's going to reward you for it.

Doing good, not so you can go to Heaven but because you are . . . because you are engaged in this battle we're talking about today – which is not a picnic; it involves resisting sin and practicing holy disciplines and studying the word and dying to self and praying that you will ***become a doer of the word and not a hearer only*** (James 1:25).

Watch out, that you backslide and lose ground in your spiritual maturity.

And John doesn't want you to lose your full reward in glory . . . notice verse 8 . . .

Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward (2 John 8).

John points off in the distance to that moment Paul describes more fully as the moment of rewarding the believer, when we stand before Christ at the Bema seat –

The bema was a raised platform in the first century where speeches were delivered; it was a place where judges or political leaders sat and athletes were given their laurel wreaths for running their race well; where citizens were given rewards from the government for acts of service to their community (***2 Corinthians 5:10***).

Paul uses this concept of the Bema for that time when Jesus will actually reward the believer for whatever you did that honored Him in obedience – from changing diapers to making disciples.

Now, to help us understand this event, the expression John uses here translated ***full reward*** is a financial term – *misthos* – it's a word taken from the world of employment. In

fact, the word for reward is the typical word used in John's generation for a workman's wage.^{viii}

Have you ever gotten a paycheck and it wasn't the amount you were expecting? Hey, this isn't the full amount. Yea, but remember you took two days off that you didn't have coming. Oh. And you took a holiday that wasn't a paid holiday . . . Oh. And you left two hours early the other day and the boss noticed and docked your pay . . . oh.

Yes, you're an employee . . . you belong, as it were, to the company . . . but you didn't get the fullest possibility of payment.

That's the idea here . . . John is simply saying the same thing another way . . . don't backslide . . . stay alert – and stay at it . . . I want your paycheck for having been in the King's employment to be the fullest possible amount.

In his book entitled, *Don't Waste Your Life*, by John Piper, he writes about two things that marked his young mind for life.

His father, also a preacher, used to tell the story of a man converted to Christ in old age. The church had prayed for this man for decades. He was stubborn and resistant. But one Sunday, for some reason, he showed up when John's father was preaching. At the end of the service, to everyone's amazement he came and took my father's hand. They sat down together on the front pew of the church and God opened his heart to the gospel of Christ and he was saved.

But – and this is the part that marked young John Piper's heart and mind – this man sat there and sobbed and sobbed, and as tears flowed down his wrinkled face were his words, "I've wasted it . . . I've wasted it." Piper writes – more than all the stories of young people who died in car wrecks before they were converted – that old man weeping that he'd wasted his life awakened in me a fear and a passion not to waste mine.

He writes, another riveting force in my young life was a plaque that hung in our kitchen over the sink. I suppose I saw that plaque

almost every day of my childhood, until I left for college. It was a simple piece of glass painted black with words written in white letters that read,

Only one life,
Twill soon be past;
Only what's done
For Christ will last.

That's it . . . that's all . . . only one; and the lasting measure of it all – and of it being worth it all – a life of progress, and ultimately a life of reward, is a life simply given to Jesus Christ.^{ix}

To make life really matter, is John the Apostle's desire in writing this letter.

But it means that this woman, and her children, and her church – and you and me – view the Christian life as more than a picnic with nice little lunches spread out on clean blankets and with the sun shining. We merely talk of a battle out there somewhere in the distance.

But John wants you to be alert . . . the battle is in your front yard . . . don't stop progressing in spiritual maturity; don't waste your life . . . work toward receiving the fullest possible reward as a good steward, one day in glory.

John doesn't just want you to look around, and be alert; he wants you to look ahead . . . and anticipate. Look all the way ahead to the Bema where you see your Savior seated; anticipate that moment He will say, *Welcome Home; you ran the race I gave to just you to run . . . you didn't run it perfectly . . . you stumbled and fell daily . . . you limped a lot . . . you got cramps and complained at times . . . but you didn't leave the race . . . you ran . . . and now you've finished it . . . and I have some rewards that are going to surprise you.*

And Jesus will say to you and me – His beloved, His . . . and this is just another staggering demonstration of His grace – He's going to say to his sheep . . . *you finished it . . . well done . . . well done . . . well done.*

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- i Adapted from Max Lucado, Unshakable Hope (Thomas Nelson, 2018), p. 25
- ii Karen H. Jobes, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1, & 3 John (Zondervan, 2014), p. 265
- iii Adapted from D. Edmond Hiebert, The Epistles of John (BJU Press, 1991), p. 303
- iv John Phillips, Exploring the Epistles of John (Kregel, 2003), p. 203
- v Adapted from Gary W. Derickson, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary: 1, 2 & 3 John (Lexham Press, 2014), p.
- vi J.B. Phillips, Letters to Young Churches (Macmillan Company, 1965), p. 225
- vii John D. Hannah, 1, 2, 3 John (Christian Focus, 2016), p. 217
- viii Hiebert, p. 305
- ix Adapted from John Piper, Don't Waste Your Life (Crossway Books, 2013), p. 12