

5

Hope

1 John 2:28–3:10

Over the course of a lifetime of following Jesus, the Apostle John faced many painful discouragements. John was at the cross, watching when his master died (John 19:26–27, 35). Early in his ministry, John was imprisoned with Peter for preaching the gospel (Acts 4), and he had a difficult ministry that included pastoring his people through schisms (1 John 2:18–19) and in the face of rebellious members in the church (3 John 1:9–10).

When King Herod began to persecute the early church, he killed John's brother James (Acts 12:2). In fact, tradition holds that John outlived all the other apostles (his closest friends), after most of them (if not all) were martyred for their faith. John himself was not martyred, but he was banished to the island of Patmos "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 1:9). John had to live out his remaining days in lonely exile after everyone he loved best had died.

John was thoroughly acquainted with sorrow, adversity, and grief, and he faced constant threats because of the message of the gospel he faithfully preached. Still, John's writings (his Gospel, his three letters, and the book of Revelation) are filled with hope, joy, and peace. John, then, has something

THAT YOU MAY KNOW

important to teach us about how to have hope in the midst of all the suffering we face in our lives.

In the previous chapter, we looked at John's warnings to persevere in the face of dangers from the world and from within the church, but Christianity isn't about learning how to grit our teeth or to keep a stiff upper lip. In other words, the point isn't merely to survive. Our heavenly Father wants something better for us than living every moment of our lives on the verge of collapsing under the pressure of discipleship. Remember, Jesus said his yoke is easy and his burden is light (Matthew 11:30). The gospel is a message of hope.

This doesn't mean at all that discipleship is easy or that Jesus will somehow help us to avoid pain and suffering—no, Jesus tells us plainly we must take up our own cross if we want to follow him (Matthew 16:24). The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45) summarized Jesus' statement bluntly, so there would be no misunderstanding: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."¹ These were not empty words, as Bonhoeffer was eventually martyred in a Nazi prison camp for his faith.

John does not fill us with false hope of perpetual prosperity and abundance, but he also does not morbidly sulk in doom and gloom. John is realistic about the reality of pain, but ultimately, he lives by hope that things will not always be as they are now.

John wants to encourage us in the knowledge that one day, Jesus will return to set all things right. On that day, there will be no more tears. On that day, there will be perfect, lasting justice. On that day, we will even become like Jesus, for we will see him just as he is in his unveiled glory. That is the hope to which John looks next. He writes:

^{2:28}And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is manifested we may have complete confidence and not shrink in shame from him at his coming. ²⁹If you know that he is righteous, you know also that everyone practicing righteousness has been born of him.

^{3:1}See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we might be called children of God, and we are! Because of this the world does not know us, for it did not know him. (1 John 2:28–3:1)

ABIDE IN HIM

John finds hope exclusively in Jesus Christ. After concluding a difficult section in this letter about perseverance, he immediately encourages us to remember the source of our hope by a simple, gentle command: “And now, little children, abide in him.”

Abide is a word John uses many times in this letter. He has already used the word ten times before this point, and he will use the word another eleven times before the letter is done.² The word means to “remain” or to “continue,” and John uses it in this letter to describe a broad range of circumstances, including many aspects of our relationship with God, God’s relationship with us, and our relationship to others in the church:

- We abide in Christ (1 John 2:6, 24, 27, 28; 3:6; 4:13).
- We abide in the Father (1 John 2:24).
- God’s seed abides in us (1 John 3:9).
- The anointing of the Holy Spirit abides in us (1 John 2:27).
- We abide in the light (1 John 2:10).
- The word of God abides in us (1 John 2:14, 24).
- Those who do the will of God will abide forever (1 John 2:17).
- The antichrists did not abide with us (1 John 2:19).
- Those who hate their brother abide in death (1 John 3:14) so that eternal life does not abide in them (1 John 3:15); nor does the love of God (1 John 3:17).
- God abides in us (1 John 3:24; 4:12, 13, 15, 16).
- We abide in God (1 John 3:24; 4:13, 15, 16).

In chapter 2, verse 28, specifically, John is urging us to continue on in Christ. Again, if anyone knows deep

THAT YOU MAY KNOW

discouragement firsthand, John does; however, John also knows the secret of how to avoid wallowing in self-pity when we begin to assess the bleakness of our situation. He knows how to cling to hope, and he teaches us that secret here.

Pay attention to the reason John gives in verse 28 as to why we ought to “abide in him”: “so that when he is manifested we may have complete confidence and not shrink in shame from him at his coming.” John is teaching us to look far beyond the immediate pain of the moment by reminding us of our future hope, that Jesus will return. When Jesus returns, he will come to judge the living and the dead, and on that day, those who have remained in Christ will stand boldly before him with confidence. Tragically, those who have not remained in Christ will shrink from him in shame at his coming.

So what does it mean to abide in Christ? Abiding in Christ is one of John’s favorite ways to talk about discipleship. We abide in Jesus when we continue and remain in him. From what we have studied so far, we know that abiding in Christ requires knowing truth, believing the gospel, growing in love, and persevering through dangers from the world and from within the church. But John gives us a new angle in verse 29: “If you know that he is righteous, you know also that everyone practicing righteousness has been born of him.” Abiding in Christ also means practicing righteousness.

For now, set aside the question of what it means to practice righteousness—we will get back to that when we look at chapter 3, verse 7, where John uses the phrase again and clarifies his meaning. Instead, reflect for a moment on a profound truth John slipped into his writing, almost completely unnoticed: “everyone practicing righteousness has been born of him.” Everyone who practices righteousness (and therefore, everyone who abides in Christ as his disciple) has been born of God.

One of the greatest privileges of following Jesus is the knowledge that we do not follow him as slaves would, cowering in fear of the day Jesus will return to judge us along

with the rest of the world. Instead, we serve Jesus as God’s own children and as Jesus’ brothers and sisters. John pleads with us to abide in Jesus because there is genuine joy there, the joy of knowing God as our heavenly Father. In chapter 3, verse 1, John overflows with his own wonder and joy at the kindness that God has shown to us: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we might be called children of God, and we are!” This is not a prank from heaven or a deception from hell but an overwhelmingly joyful reality: we are God’s own children!

This is where John finds hope in the midst of pain. This truth is the hinge on which his entire outlook hangs because it means that, no matter what might happen to him, he can appeal directly to his Father in heaven. No matter how bad things get, his elder brother Jesus is returning for him. In this truth, we can do more than endure life—after all, we are royalty, the children of the Most High King. Our enemy might harass us along the way, but the day is coming when he will be banished forever into the lake of fire, and we will reign along with Christ for all eternity.

Before we move to the next verses, don’t miss the last phrase in 1 John 3:1: “Because of this, the world does not know us, for it did not know him.” John wants us to begin to think about why it is we face such dangers in the world and from antichrists within the church. We are children of God, but not everyone shares in that same status with us. This difference causes significant hostility and even outright persecution from those who do not abide in Christ. John will explore this subject more deeply in chapter 3, verses 11 to 24, but he briefly raises the issue here. Take note of it now, and we will pick it up again in the next chapter.

WE SHALL BE LIKE HIM

John does not pack his robust, practical theology more densely into any other two verses in 1 John than he does in chapter 3, verses 2 and 3:

THAT YOU MAY KNOW

²Beloved, now we are children of God, but it has not yet been manifested what we will be. We know that when he appears, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³And everyone hoping in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.

In these two verses, John sets up a tension he will carry all the way through the end of this section in chapter 3, verse 10.

The tension arises from the first two phrases in verse 2. First, John says, “now we are children of God.” John has already stated that we are God’s children (3:1), but by stating that we are God’s children *now*, John clarifies that God is not putting our inclusion into his family off to some uncertain day in the far-distant future. Instead, John is saying, Now we are God’s children, and that status cannot be called into question for any who remain (abide) in Christ—that is, for those who practice righteousness (1 John 2:28–29).

But this raises all kinds of questions: What does John mean when he talks about practicing righteousness? How much righteousness do I need to practice to remain God’s child? What happens if I fall into sin? At what point am I disqualified for failing to obey Jesus? These concerns can haunt us, especially as we peek ahead to 1 John 3:6: “Everyone abiding in him does not practice sin; every one practicing sin has not seen him, neither has he come to know him.” Or consider 1 John 3:8: “The one practicing sin is from the devil, for from the beginning the devil has been sinning.” Under this definition, does anyone qualify as a child of God?

John encourages us with hope in verse 2: “it has not yet been manifested what we will be.” Even though we are the children of God now, we have not yet grown into the fullness of that status—what we will be has not yet been completely manifested. Today, we see a glimpse of the glory, but the total glory we will one day enjoy has not yet been manifested.

Clearly, John is not saying that we must be perfect to remain as God’s children. John has already rejected the legalistic approach to the law, and he is not reintroducing it

here. If we twist part of what John says to argue that we must be perfect in this life, we have to ignore the rest of what he says acknowledging our ongoing limitations. In the Christian life, there is a constant tension between the already and the not yet. Already we are children of God, and already we resemble him, just as children resemble their human fathers. But we have not yet been fully transformed into the image of Christ, who already bears perfect resemblance to his Father. What we will be has not yet been manifested.

The remaining phrase in verse 2 in many ways resolves this tension: “We know that when he appears, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” The good work that God has already begun in us (*now* we are children of God) will be completed when our future reality finally appears—on the day of Christ Jesus, and not before.

But there is even more here. We have now seen when the already/not yet tension will be resolved (when Jesus returns), but notice how we will ultimately gain the full glory of our status as children of God: “when he appears, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” Somehow, in some way, simply seeing our Lord Jesus Christ will transform us to be like him.

Paul hints at something similar in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” Beholding the glory of the God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6) is the catalyst for transforming the not yet into the already. This process begins now in part, but when Jesus returns our transformation will be made complete.

So, what are we supposed to do until that day when Jesus returns? How should we live in the present, while we are waiting to see Jesus in all his glory? John gives the answer in verse 3: “And everyone hoping in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.” Because we are already God’s children, but not yet fully formed into the image of Christ, we move in that direction

THAT YOU MAY KNOW

as the Holy Spirit purifies us more and more, every day—that is, as we seek to become more and more like Jesus by the grace of God. Theologians call this growth “sanctification.”

But for now, little children, abide in him. Now we are children of God, and our Father in heaven intends for us to live in anticipation of the day when our future reality will appear: the day when we become like Christ by seeing him as he is.

PRACTICING SIN, PRACTICING RIGHTEOUSNESS

In 1 John 3:4–10, John makes a startling claim: if we have indeed been born of God, we are not able to practice sin. The logic is simple: if we practice sin in an ongoing, unchecked way, then by definition, we have not been born of God. Read carefully what John says here, because this passage is easily misunderstood:

⁴Everyone practicing sin also practices lawlessness, for sin is lawlessness. ⁵And you have come to know that he appeared in order that he might take away sins, and there is not sin in him. ⁶Everyone abiding in him does not practice sin; every one practicing sin has not seen him, neither has he come to know him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you: the one practicing righteousness is righteous, just as he is righteous. ⁸The one practicing sin is from the devil, for from the beginning the devil has been sinning. Unto this *purpose* the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. ⁹Everyone having been born of God does not practice sin, for his seed abides in him, and he is not able to practice sin, for he has been born of God. ¹⁰In this is manifest *who are* the children of God and *who are* the children of the devil: everyone not practicing righteousness is not of God, nor the one not loving his brother.

At first glance, John’s demands seem impossible and overwhelming. Is he really saying we are children of the devil unless we are able to abandon sin completely? If I keep on

sinning every week, every day, or even every hour, is that proof that God’s seed is not in me? Who could possibly meet such an expectation?

But John isn’t demanding perfection, and God isn’t either. Seriously. This is clear from the section we just looked at in 1 John 3:2–3, when he insisted that now we are children of God, even though what we will be has not yet been manifested. John knows and acknowledges two truths here: although we are already God’s children, we are not yet fully formed in the image of Christ.

So, instead of demanding perfection, John is actually describing what it means to purify ourselves, as he talks about in verse 3. Compare these two verses:

And everyone hoping in him purifies himself, just as he is pure [*kathos ekeinos hagnos estin*]. (1 John 3:3)

...the one practicing righteousness is righteous, just as he is righteous [*kathos ekeinos dikaios estin*]. (1 John 3:7)

Finally we come to the meaning of “practicing righteousness”: John is purposefully drawing a parallel here between purifying yourself (i.e., lifelong, growing, progressive sanctification) and practicing righteousness. Practicing righteousness does not mean practicing perfection. Instead, practicing righteousness means we commit to ongoing purification throughout our lives by continuing to repent from our sin and believe in the gospel, trusting in God to give us growth in righteousness by grace.

Of course we will sin. Of course we will stumble. In fact, John has already told us, “If we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). He expects that we will sin, and he warns that anyone who says they do not sin is a liar.

When John talks about the person who is practicing sin, he does not mean someone who falls short of perfection but someone who refuses to repent from their sin altogether and who neither receives nor grows in the righteousness of

THAT YOU MAY KNOW

Christ through faith in his gospel. The Son of God appeared to destroy the works of the devil, and so whoever does not turn from the works of the devil and flee to Christ has no commonality with the Son of God at all. That person makes a practice of sinning, and therefore of lawlessness, for sin is lawlessness.

Sadly, many people misunderstand this concept, so they imagine the gospel of Christianity goes something like this: we believe that Jesus lived a good life, so we try to live a good life just like he did. The problem with this view is we will inevitably experience despair when we begin to compare our own success in practicing righteousness to the success Jesus had.

But the gospel of Christianity in fact says something startlingly different: we believe Jesus came to destroy every last bit of sin, death, and the devil. Rather than looking to Jesus as a model and trying really hard to live the perfect life he lived, we instead confess our complete inability to practice righteousness on our own. Instead, we believe that God, being rich in mercy, planted his seed inside of us to change our hearts so that we can no longer embrace sin as we once did and to cause us to repent and to turn to Christ for salvation.

Now we have become the children of God, even though what we shall be has not yet appeared, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is. All who thus hope in him will practice righteousness (as he is righteous) by purifying ourselves (as he is pure) by grace and through faith in the one who practiced perfection for us and on our behalf.

Therefore, little children, *abide in him*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Why do you think John places so much emphasis on abiding in God, and on having God abide in us? How does that change the way we approach God and the way

we think about our relationship with him?

2. What effect does it have to know you are God's child *now*? What would be different if maintaining your status as a child of God were still in question?
3. How can we gaze upon Jesus now, even before he fully appears? Are you taking advantage of those opportunities to do so?
4. What would it look like in your life to pursue purifying yourself and practicing righteousness in ways you are not currently?

THAT YOU MAY KNOW

2. *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, ed. Andrew Bonar (London: Dundee, 1845), 254.

CHAPTER 3: GROWTH (1 JOHN 2:7-14)

1. See Matthew 22:34–40 and Mark 12:28–34.
2. This outline is adapted from Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, New Testament*, vol. 2 (Colorado Springs: Victor, 1989), 485–91.
3. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, vol. 22, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 181. See e.g., Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 417; Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary*, 495.

CHAPTER 4: PERSEVERANCE (1 JOHN 2:15-27)

1. Augustine, “Sermon 335C: The Sermon of the Blessed Bishop Augustine on the Feast of a Martyr,” in *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E. M. Atkins and R. J. Dodaro (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), 59.
2. E.g., “pride in riches” (New Revised Standard Version), or “pride in possessions” (ESV).
3. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 426.
4. Thomas Chalmers, “Discourse IX. The Expulsive Power of a New Affection,” in *The Works of Thomas Chalmers*, vol. 6 (New York: Robert Carter, 1840), 209.
5. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 427.
6. Chalmers, “Discourse IX,” 209.

CHAPTER 5: HOPE (1 JOHN 2:28-3:10)

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 89.
2. 1 John 2:6, 10, 14, 17, 19, 24 (3x), 27 (2x), 28; 3:6, 9, 14, 15, 17, 24 (2x); 4:12, 13, 15, 16.