

# 9

## Faith

*1 John 5:1–12*

**W**e closed the previous chapter with words from 1 John 4:7: “Beloved, let us love one another, for the love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” This kind of supernatural love, John explains, is something that comes only from God. So, those who act out this kind of love show evidence that they have been born of God and that they know God. The opposite statement is also true: whoever does not love has not been born of God and does not know God.

Love comes only from God. There is no way to produce love in your own life apart from the omnipotent power of the Holy Spirit’s ministry, as he shines light on the gospel of Jesus, illuminating Christ’s beauty so that you cannot help but to look upon Jesus, believe in him, and be saved. From there, the gracious, life-giving Spirit only continues his work to produce love in your life, causing the roots of the gospel to grow deeper and deeper into your heart.

But what about faith? Where does it come from? Based on what the Apostle John has just written, we can agree that love comes from God, but where does our faith come from? Is faith the piece that we bring to the table, our own small contribution that gives God formal permission to begin applying his work of salvation in our lives? Or, does faith

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also come from God, in the same way that love comes from God?

Now, the Scriptures are very clear that salvation comes only by faith and not by anything good we ourselves do. The Apostle Paul is especially insistent on this point:

Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Galatians 2:16)

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8–9)

But what isn't so clear from these passages is the question of where our faith comes from. Look again at Ephesians 2:8–9, and notice the second sentence: "And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." What exactly is Paul referring to when he says, "this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God"? If he is only talking about the phrase "For by grace you have been saved," then his writing is redundant, since salvation "by grace" is by definition a gift of God, and not our own doing.

In the context, then, the best explanation is that Paul is referring to salvation as well as to the phrase "through faith." Paul is teaching here that the whole work of salvation—including our faith, as well as our love—comes as a gift of God and is not something that we produce independently from God. Through some mystery, God graciously gives even our faith to us as a loving gift.

Now, let's return to our study in 1 John. The apostle picks up the same themes in 1 John 5:1–12 as he continues to spiral toward the climax of his letter. In the first five verses of this passage, John offers the clearest, most concise summary of

his theology in all of 1 John:

<sup>1</sup>Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves *whoever* has been born of him. <sup>2</sup>In this we know that we love the children of God, whenever we love God and obey his commandments. <sup>3</sup>For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome. <sup>4</sup>For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world, and this is the victory that overcame the world: our faith. <sup>5</sup>But who is the one who overcomes the world if not the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:1–5)

John has already written about believing in Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God, loving the brethren, and keeping the commandments, but he does something different from the rest of his letter here: (1) he shows how these virtues all stem from our being born of God; and (2) he describes these virtues as a great victory over the world.

### **THE NEW BIRTH**

John attributes both faith and love to the miraculous power of the new birth, what theologians sometimes call “regeneration.” Note the tenses at work in verse 1: “Everyone who believes [present] that Jesus is the Christ has been born [present perfect] of God.” If someone believes now, it is because that person has (already) been born of God. Faith comes as a result of new birth. As John Stott explains in his commentary, “believing is the consequence, not the cause, of the new birth.”<sup>1</sup>

John Murray explains this concept more fully:

Regeneration is the beginning of all saving grace in us, and all saving grace in exercise on our part proceeds from the fountain of regeneration. We are not born again by faith or repentance or conversion; we repent and believe because we have been regenerated....

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The embrace of Christ in faith is the first evidence of regeneration and only thus may we know that we have been regenerated.<sup>2</sup>

Regeneration (the new birth) is the fountainhead of our salvation. As Murray notes, we repent and believe because God has begun a new work in us through regeneration. Faith, then, is the first sign that God has given us new birth.

This was also how John wrote about love in the previous passage in 1 John 4:7: “everyone who loves has been born of God.” Just as it is impossible to love apart from being born of God, so it is impossible to believe that Jesus is the Christ apart from being born of God. To paraphrase John Stott, love (like faith) is the consequence and not the cause of the new birth.

Recall that John had previously written about being born of God in a passage about our hope in Christ:

<sup>2:29</sup>If you know that he is righteous, you know also that everyone practicing righteousness *has been born of him*. <sup>3:1</sup>See what kind of love the Father has given to us, *that we might be called children of God*, and we are!... <sup>2</sup>Beloved, *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. <sup>3</sup>And everyone hoping in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.... <sup>9</sup>*Everyone 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*. <sup>10</sup>In 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* [“of God” is short for “born of God”], nor the one not loving his brother. (1 John 2:29–3:10)

The new birth, as John explains it, causes a radical departure from our old lives. Where we formerly lived in sin and hatred, we now practice righteousness and love our fellow believers. Of course, we don’t do these things perfectly all the time, but God’s “seed abides in” us in such a way that keeps drawing us back to God, repenting from

our sins and believing the gospel, learning to love others more and more.

John also talks in this passage about keeping God’s commandments, but it’s clear he is thinking primarily of the commandment to love: “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments” (1 John 5:3). Do you remember all the way back to 1 John 2:7–11? There, John explained that the old commandment they had heard from the beginning had become a new commandment in Jesus—and that the old commandment Jesus made new was the commandment to love: “The one who loves his brother abides in the light and in him is not a stumbling block” (1 John 2:10).

So, when John tells us that “his commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3), we understand what he means: our new birth supplies us all the power of the Holy Spirit to obey God’s commandments. Of course, obeying God will be challenging, but because we have been born of God and are no longer the children of the devil (1 John 3:10), keeping God’s commandments is no longer something that is completely against our nature.

### **THE VICTORY OF BEING BORN OF GOD**

As John continues to describe this radical life transformation, he calls the new birth “the victory that overcame the world” in 1 John 5:4. The word for “victory” (and also for “overcome”) is *nike*, a word that the Greeks used as the name of the winged goddess of victory, Nike. (The shoe company is named after this Greek goddess, and the company’s swoosh logo is meant to represent the goddess Nike’s wings.) John uses the word four times in 1 John 5:4–5: “For everyone who has been born of God overcomes [*nika*] the world, and this is the victory [*nike*] that overcame [*nikesasa*] the world: our faith. But who is the one who overcomes [*nikon*] the world if not the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” Our victory is the greatest of all victories. Alexander the Great probably got the

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farthest in conquering the world through his great military victories across Europe, Africa, and Asia, but even he died before he could overcome the whole world. Yet John writes here that even the humblest, smallest, weakest child who believes upon Jesus has overcome the entire world.

How? By faith. Specifically, by faith that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 5:1) and that Jesus is the eternal Son of God (1 John 5:5). John had previously insisted that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God in 1 John 2:22–24:

<sup>22</sup>Who is the liar except the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This one is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. <sup>23</sup>Everyone who denies the Son does not have the Father either; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also. <sup>24</sup>As for you, let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you will also abide in the Son and in the Father.

Anyone who grasps the significance of these statements does so only because God has graciously given them new birth, and a new life—a new life defined by the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

No one, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit to grant us the new birth, could possibly embrace these thoughts because they are so foolish to human wisdom. Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ and the Son of God? Jesus, born out of wedlock to a poor, teenage girl? Jesus, condemned for blasphemy and cursed by God as he died on a tree? This Jesus is the Son of God and the Anointed Christ of God?

Only the new birth can overcome the skepticism of this world in order to believe in Jesus wholeheartedly—just as only the new birth can grant us love for one another and create obedient hearts. Everyone who believes, who loves, and who obeys—that is, everyone who has victory over the world—has undoubtedly been born of God.

**THERE ARE THREE THAT TESTIFY**

Even though Christians experience a victorious new birth, being born of God himself, in order to believe, love, and obey, we still continue to wrestle throughout our lives with the question of why we believe, love, and obey. Does our faith rest on some kind of psychological deception, whether from an over-emotionalized experience, a desperately guilty conscience, or some kind of longing for an absent father figure? Deep down, are we loving other Christians simply to gain power, influence, and maybe even money from those we pretend to love? Does our obedience spring from nothing more than a desire to lift ourselves up and put others down on the basis of self-righteous legalism? And if not, what makes our own faith, love, and obedience legitimate?

John addresses our questions concerning the reality of Jesus by pointing us to the testimony of the “three that testify,” water, blood, and the Spirit. He writes:

<sup>6</sup>This is the one who came by water and blood: Jesus Christ—not in the water only but in the water and in the blood. And the Spirit is the one who gives testimony, for the Spirit is the Truth. <sup>7</sup>For there are three who give testimony, <sup>8</sup>the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree [lit., “the three are unto the one”]. (1 John 5:6–8)

The reason our new birth is a victory and not a mind-washing defeat is that the new birth frees us from our sin-imposed blindness to see and love the truth about Jesus, especially as we consider the testimony of the witnesses he calls forward.

Now, John is not entirely clear about the precise meaning of his witnesses. In fact, verse 6 is one of the more controversial verses in the Bible because John does not explicitly spell out what the water and the blood signify, even if “the Spirit” clearly refers to the Holy Spirit. Adding further confusion, the King James Version of the Bible

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unfortunately follows a bad textual source, so that verses 7–8 say this:

<sup>7</sup>For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. <sup>8</sup>And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. (1 John 5:7–8 KJV)

Despite the fact that verse 7 in the KJV expounds good trinitarian theology, it isn't what John wrote. The addition of "the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost" doesn't "appear in a single Greek manuscript of the New Testament prior to about 1520," over fourteen hundred years after John wrote his letter.<sup>3</sup>

So, what is John's purpose in citing the water, the blood, and the Spirit? If we look closely at what John writes, we can find clues. It seems that water (whatever water might mean) was not the disputed witness, for Jesus Christ came "not in the water only but in the water and the blood." From this, it sounds as though the people against whom John is writing wanted to focus exclusively on the water, ignoring the witness of the blood. John insists, though, that Jesus did not come *only* in the water but in the water *and* the blood.

John's contested witness, then, is "the blood." John had written about the blood of Jesus before, telling us that it is Jesus' blood that cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). Additionally, when John speaks of Jesus as the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:2, 4:10), he is making reference to the blood sacrifice of Jesus that is effective for the forgiveness of our sins. The blood of Jesus represents our Lord's suffering, crucifixion, and death, and John is insisting on its testimony for his case.

The best explanation of what the water and the blood mean here, then, is that many false teachers (the antichrists; 1 John 2:18–27) had been preaching that the divine Christ descended upon the human Jesus at the baptism and then



departed from Jesus before the cross. The problem in John's day was not so much that people were challenging the divinity of Jesus (although some challenged Jesus' relationship as the Son to the Father) but that they were challenging his full humanity. How could God actually become a human? If *this* Jesus actually shed fully human blood for us, then the antichrists lose their case.

The Gospels, however, point with a unified voice to the full humanity and the full deity of Jesus. He was not a god who only seemed human, and he was not a human who lied about being God. Instead, we read that the Father bore witness concerning the Son at Jesus' baptism (the water): "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17; see also Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22, John 1:32–34). The accounts of the four Gospels have slight variations, as each writer brings out a different aspect of Jesus' baptism, but they all agree in testifying that Jesus is the Son of God, in whom the Father is well pleased.

The accounts of the crucifixion (the blood) have a bit more variation; however, all of them also testify that this Jesus dying on the cross was still the Son of God—the Divine Christ had not somehow left the man Jesus, as the antichrists suggested. In the accounts of Matthew 27:54 and Mark 15:39, the Roman centurion and those with him seeing Jesus die were compelled to declare, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" In Luke 23:40–42, one of the criminals crucified next to Jesus recognizes that Jesus has done nothing wrong and asks Jesus to remember him when Jesus comes into his kingdom. Then, Luke also records that the centurion declares, "Certainly this man was innocent!" (Luke 23:47). Keep in mind that the charges against Jesus were for blasphemy by claiming to be the Son of God (Luke 22:70–71). For the thief on the cross and the centurion to claim that Jesus was innocent is a roundabout way of affirming, along with the accounts recorded in Matthew and in Mark, that Jesus is the Son of God.

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The account in the Gospel of John (written by the same Apostle John who wrote the letter we are studying) is the most interesting of the four. John writes:

<sup>31</sup>Since it was the day of Preparation, and so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. <sup>32</sup>So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him. <sup>33</sup>But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. <sup>34</sup>But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, *and at once there came out blood and water.* <sup>35</sup>*He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe.* (John 19:31–35)

Some people think the Apostle John is referring in 1 John 5:6–7 to the blood and water that came from the side of Jesus, since the language is so similar; however, if this were the case, it is difficult to see how anyone could believe that Jesus came by the water but not the blood: “This is the one who came by water and blood: Jesus Christ—*not in the water only* but in the water and in the blood” (1 John 5:6).

The better explanation, then, is that John recorded the physical outpouring of water and blood from the side of Jesus in his Gospel as a true, vivid illustration to confirm that Jesus had indeed come both by water at his baptism and by blood at his crucifixion. Notice that immediately after John mentions the flow of blood and water in John 19:35, he insists that he has given eyewitness testimony that is true (and he knows that he is telling the truth!) so that you, the reader, may also believe. This isn’t a free-association game in John’s mind but an insight that came from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to shed light on the meaning of what John physically saw as an eyewitness at the cross. The Son of God had come by the water and the blood, and any spirit that does not confess Jesus

Christ having-come-in-flesh is not from God but is the spirit of the antichrist (1 John 4:2–3).

### **WHOEVER HAS THE SON HAS LIFE**

But one witness remains: the Spirit. In fact, John has more to say about the Spirit than he does about the water and the blood combined. So, what is the Spirit’s testimony? How does he enhance the testimony of the water and the blood? He writes:

<sup>7</sup>For there are three who give testimony, <sup>8</sup>the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. <sup>9</sup>If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater. For this is the testimony of God that he has given testimony concerning his Son. <sup>10</sup>The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe in God has made him a liar, for he has not believed in the testimony which God has given concerning his Son. <sup>11</sup>And this is the testimony, that God has given eternal life to us, and this life is in his Son. <sup>12</sup>The one who has the Son has the life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5:7–12)

First, John reminds us that we dare not oppose the testimony of the Spirit, because the Spirit who testifies is himself God: “If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater. For this is the testimony of God that he has given testimony concerning his Son.... [T]he one who does not believe in God has made him a liar, for he has not believed in the testimony which God has given concerning his Son” (1 John 5:9, 10).

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, sharing the same divine nature with the Father and the Son but at the same time a distinct person from the Father and the Son. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three persons but one God—not three gods and not a single person who manifests himself in different ways at different times (here as the Father, there

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as the Son, and now as the Holy Spirit), but three persons who exist in relationship together as one God. This doctrine of the Trinity is beyond our ability to understand fully, but yet the Scriptures reveal again and again that there is only one God and that this God reveals himself as three distinct persons.

Second, John does not say here that the Holy Spirit testifies by working through rational, point-by-point reasoning to persuade our minds logically. In other words, the Spirit does not come to us saying, “Here are the five reasons you ought to believe that the man Jesus is the Son of God.” Now, this doesn’t mean that Christianity is an illogical religion. God invented reason, and God does reason with us logically through his word. Paul’s letter to the Romans, for example, is a masterpiece of Christian logic.

But John is saying here that the Spirit offers something other than a purely logical testimony by appealing to us through our minds. In fact, the testimony of the Spirit is more direct than that: “The one who believes in the Son of God *has the testimony in himself*” (1 John 5:10). We receive the Spirit’s testimony internally, not as something that comes to us from an outside source. So, the testimony we receive from the Spirit does not consist of raw facts nor of an aesthetically beautiful faith system nor of emotionally pleasing feelings. We do not receive the testimony, evaluate it, and then decide whether we like it.

Instead, John explains to us that the Spirit’s testimony is life itself: “And this is the testimony, that God has given eternal life to us, and this life is in his Son” (1 John 5:11). God’s testimony, John explains, works like this: We, like Lazarus, lie dead in the tomb. We have been swallowed up by the grave because of our sins, without any hope of recovery. The Holy Spirit, like Jesus in front of his friend’s tomb, proclaims, “Lazarus, come out!” By this extraordinary, life-giving testimony of the Holy Spirit, we are born of God in a moment to new, eternal life—as well as to new faith, new

love, and new obedience. Now that we are alive, we cannot help but to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and to love fellow believers—all because the Holy Spirit has testified us back to life.

This eternal life, however, is not independent or stand-alone. We cannot take eternal life as an acquired possession and then go back to our old ways of living apart from God. Instead, eternal life is wrapped up in Jesus Christ: “and this life is in his Son. The one who has the Son has the life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:11b–12). In fact, *this* Jesus—the Son of God who came in the flesh—is himself the eternal life given to us by the testimony of the Spirit.

If you have Jesus, you have life—in fact, you also have, along with Christ, the testimony of the Spirit, the new birth, the faith, the love, and the obedience. The Spirit bears witness to Jesus, and the Spirit’s life-giving testimony is Jesus—not merely a message about Jesus or an argument for Jesus, but *Jesus himself* in all his glory.

Our new faith is not an intellectual decision we come to independently, through our own reasoning; it is the natural result of our new birth when the Holy Spirit gives us Jesus. Our new love is not something we begin to try really hard to do, attempting to imitate what Jesus demonstrated perfectly when he died on the cross; instead, Jesus made the old commandment to love one another radically new by giving us life itself through the gospel. The obedience commanded by God’s law becomes simple in Jesus—we learn to obey as the Spirit gives us more and more of Jesus.

But if you do not have the Son of God, you have nothing. On behalf of Christ, by the mercy of the Father, according to the life-giving testimony of the Spirit, I plead with you: Be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. Do not harden your dead heart any longer against the life that is in Jesus Christ. Embrace him by faith.

The one who has the Son has the life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

1. What surprises you most about what John teaches us regarding the new birth?
2. How should it affect our evangelism if the chief witness the Holy Spirit uses to convince people to believe in Jesus is life and not logical arguments?
3. If you are honest, do you place more value on the benefits we gain from Jesus (forgiveness of sins, social standing, better friendships/marriages/parenting/jobs, etc.) or on the fullness of life we experience through knowing Jesus?

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in 4:3: “every spirit that does not confess *the* Jesus having come in the flesh is not from God” to differentiate the having-come-in-flesh Jesus from the various false versions of Jesus promoted by the prophets of the spirit of error.

3. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 39.
4. Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 163.

### **CHAPTER 9: FAITH (1 JOHN 5:1–12)**

1. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 172.
2. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1961), 103.
3. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 372.

### **CHAPTER 10: PRAYER (1 JOHN 5:13–17)**

1. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 185.
2. Jeremiah 7:16–18, 11:14, 14:11; see also Kruse, *Letters of John*, 193.
3. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 534–35, emphasis added.

### **CHAPTER 11: ETERNAL LIFE (1 JOHN 5:18–21)**

1. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 393.
2. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 194.
3. Appian, *The Civil Wars*, book 1, §120.
4. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 544–45.

### **CHAPTER 12: THE CASE STUDY OF THE ELECT LADY (2 JOHN)**

1. The only other New Testament letter that does not