

“The True God and Eternal Life”

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Just yesterday, I listened to a podcast of a British radio show called “Unbelievable.” This show usually features a dialogue between a Christian and an atheist, or someone else who holds different beliefs. On this episode, a Christian theologian, Alister McGrath, talked with a scientist and an atheist, Colin Blakemore, about this topic: “Can science, God (or both) explain the human quest for meaning?”¹ Toward the end of the program, the host asked both men what they would say is the meaning of life. The atheist wondered if that’s a valid question. Does life really have a meaning? He thought that the question implied that there was an outside evaluator of a person’s life, a being who says that the person’s life is meaningful. Sadly, he didn’t think that it’s necessary or even desirable to have that kind of firm meaning to life.

I do think it’s necessary. If our lives don’t have meaning, if they don’t amount to anything in the end, how can we live with purpose? How can we enjoy our lives, knowing they’re meaningless? How can we have hope if we’re here, we live, we die, and no one will remember us or care? We may not think about these issues often, but these are the kind of questions that pop up when we’re tired, when we feel weak, when we’ve lost someone or something in our life, or when we realize that time is moving fast and life hasn’t played out the way we thought it would.

I firmly believe that the purpose of life is to know the one true God and to live for him. That means we must know what this God is like. We must have a relationship with this God. We must know what he expects of us. The story of the Bible is that we were made to serve God, to represent him and worship him and love him and obey him, the way that obedient children obey a perfect, loving, good father. The story of the Bible tells us that that though we were made to know this God and serve him and love him, we have all turned away from him. But God came to get us, to reconcile us to himself. More specifically, God the Father sent God the Son to come into the world as a man, to live the life we were intended to live, and to pay the penalty for our

¹ <https://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/Episodes/Unbelievable-Can-science-God-or-both-explain-the-human-quest-for-meaning-Alister-McGrath-Colin-Blakemore>. The episode aired on July 22, 2017.

rebellion against God. The Father sent the Son into the world to reveal clearly who he is, and also to destroy the works of evil. The Father sent the Son into the world to give us life.

How can we know that we have this life? That's what one of Jesus' followers, the apostle John, writes about in 1 John. For the last three months, we've been going through this book, passage by passage. Today, we'll finish the book. And what I want to do before getting to the final section is summarize what we've seen so far. So, without further ado, this is the message of 1 John.

John begins his letter by saying that he heard, saw, and touched "the word of life," that is, Jesus (1 John 1:1).² He even calls Jesus "the eternal life" (1:2). That's because Jesus is the key to having eternal life.³ John says that he is writing so that his readers can have fellowship with him, who has fellowship with God the Father and God the Son, Jesus (1 John 1:3). In other words, he wants to make sure his readers also have eternal life and fellowship with God.

Then, John says that God is light (1:5). God is the source of life and truth. If we want to have that life and live in a way that accords with the truth, we must walk in the light. That means we can't lie about who we are, what our condition is, and how we live. We must practice the truth (1:6). If we walk in the light, we'll let God's truth expose the truth about us. That means we'll let God expose our sin, all our wrongdoing. And if we do that, "the blood of Jesus . . . cleanses us from all sin" (1:7). If we say we don't sin, that we're not in the wrong and haven't gone against God's design for our lives, we're liars (1:8). Yet, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1:9).

In chapter 2, John says that he doesn't want his readers to sin. But if we do sin (and John's already clear that we all sin), "we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (2:1). Christians have Jesus as their advocate. He pleads his own sacrifice for our sin before the Father and he intercedes for us. "He is the propitiation for our sins," because he is the only Savior this world has (2:2). That means that Jesus' work on our behalf makes God favorable to us. He removes the sin of his people.

The way we know we're Christians is that we do what Christ says (2:3). That doesn't mean we're Christians *because* we first do what he says, as if we earn the status of children of God. No, salvation is a gift. But those who have received the gift should then obey their Lord

² All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

³ In John's Gospel, his biography of Jesus, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

and Savior. The one who obeys has God's love in him and he lives in Jesus (2:5–6). The major commandment to obey is to love one's "brother" (or sister) in Christ (2:7–11).

John then tells different groups of Christians that his writing is to them. He writes to all Christians, whom he calls "children," because their sins have been forgiven through Jesus and because they know the Father. He writes to older Christians because they know "him who is from the beginning," Jesus. He writes to younger Christians because they "have overcome the evil one," the devil, and because they are strong and have God's word abiding in them (2:12–14).

Having mentioned the devil and the need to overcome him, John then urges his readers not to love "the world or the things in the world" (2:15). He doesn't mean we can't love anything that's created. That would be strange, and it would mean we couldn't love each other or the good things God has made. When John uses "the world," he means the realm of sinful humans (and evil spirits) opposed to God's rule. Our sinful desires, our lust for things, and the way we take pride in our possessions are all not of God, but of the world (2:16). The world and its sinful desires will pass away, "but whoever does the will of God abides forever" (2:17).

At this point, John gets to one of the main reasons why he is writing. There have been some people who had left the churches he was writing to. These people appeared to be Christians, but they abandoned the faith. It's not that they truly had faith and then disbelieved. Instead, John says, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us" (2:19). In fact, John calls these people "antichrists" (2:18). They were literally opposed to Jesus because they had different views about who Jesus is and what he came to do. John urges his readers not to believe a false message about Jesus because they have already heard the truth and because they have already been anointed with the Holy Spirit. Therefore, they don't need to hear another gospel message (2:20–27).

At the very end of chapter 2, John says that Christians should "abide" in Jesus so that they have confidence when he returns. (Jesus is now in heaven, but some day he will return to judge everyone who has lived and to restore the earth.) Those who practice righteousness are united to Jesus, who is righteous (2:28–29).

In chapter 3, John says that though Christians won't be fully like Jesus until they see him face to face (3:2), they should strive to be like him now. That is, they should practice righteousness. They shouldn't sin. Christians shouldn't have lives marked by sin (3:4–7). In this world, there are children of God, but there are also children of the devil. John doesn't mean

biological children; he's talking about two spiritual fathers and their spiritual children. Children of God imitate their Father while children of the devil imitate the devil, who is a rebel and a liar and who hates God (3:8–10).

The children of the devil are like Cain, who killed his brother, Abel (3:12). But God's children should love (3:11). They should lay down their lives for each other the way that Jesus laid down his life for us (3:16). Love isn't merely a feeling. True love is done not just in words, but "in deed and in truth" (3:18). That means helping meet each other's needs (3:17).

If we don't help those in need, our corrupt hearts condemn us (3:20). But if our hearts desire to do the right thing, if they love others, and that love leads to action, then we have confidence that God will answer our prayers (3:21–22). We can have that confidence because we believe in Jesus and obey his commandment to love one another (3:23).

In chapter 4, John warns that there are false spirits in the world who influence false prophets (4:1). The true spirit, the Holy Spirit, causes people to confess Jesus "has come in the flesh" (4:2). Apparently, the antichrists, the ones who left the churches and were teaching false things about Jesus, didn't believe that Jesus actually became a real human being. They didn't believe that he is the God-man. They probably also didn't believe they had a sin problem that required a sacrifice. John wanted them to know that this false teaching isn't from God. He also wanted them to know that God is greater than "he who is in the world," the devil (4:4). The false teachers are influenced by the world and the devil, and they tell lies, and the world listens to them (4:5). On the other hand: "Whoever knows God listens to" John and other Christians, because they have "the Spirit of truth," the Holy Spirit (4:6).

Again, John tells us to love one another, because "love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God" (4:7). The fact is that God is love (4:8, 16). And we know his love because he sent his Son so that we could live through him (4:9). God loved us first, and he sent Jesus to be the propitiation of our sins (4:10). When Jesus died on the cross, he wiped away the sins of everyone who turns to him in faith, and therefore God looks upon those people with favor. Whoever knows Jesus has no need to fear on the day of judgment (4:17), because God's "perfect love casts out fear" (4:18).

In chapter 5, John stresses faith. Those who believe that Jesus is the Christ (or Messiah), the Son of God, are God's children. And everyone who is a child of God loves God's other children (5:1). Again, we know we're God's children if we love God and obey his

commandments (5:2). His commandments are not burdensome; they are for our good (5:3). And our faith enables us to have victory over the world, because we have faith in Jesus, the Son of God, who overcomes the world for us (5:4–5).

Last week, we saw that the witnesses to John’s message about Jesus are the water, the blood, and the Holy Spirit (5:6–8). Jesus’ whole ministry, from his baptism to his death on the cross, was witnessed by people like John. He taught and performed miracles in public. He died in public. And he was seen alive in public by many witnesses. Furthermore, we have the “testimony of God” (5:9) in his word, the Bible, which was written by the Holy Spirit through many people. Whoever believes this testimony has Jesus and therefore has eternal life (5:11). Whoever rejects this testimony has made God a liar and doesn’t have eternal life (5:10, 12).

And that brings us to today, when we encounter the last nine verses of the book. I wanted to provide that summary of 1 John to remind us of what we’ve already seen. If you haven’t been with us, now you get a sense of what one of Jesus’ original followers taught. I also wanted to recap the book because what we see in these last verses is somewhat repetitious. Yet John brings the message of the book to a climax by reinforcing what he has already said. And, as I said at the beginning, this message is so important because it gets to the meaning of life. Do we truly know the real God? Do we have a relationship with him? Do we have eternal life, the promise of life that continues beyond this life and lasts forever? Do we have confidence that God hears our prayers and will respond? These are questions that John answers in these verses.

So, let’s start by looking at verses 13–15:

¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. ¹⁴ And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

Verse 13 is the reason why John writes the letter. He wants his readers to *know* they have eternal life.⁴ If they believe in the name of the Son of God—if they believe that Jesus is who John has testified that Jesus is, then they have eternal life. John wants us to be sure.

We should notice that John writes, “you who believe.” This is in the present tense. It’s ongoing. Belief isn’t something you have once. Belief in Jesus is ongoing, day-to-day trust. It’s

⁴ John 20:31 is similar, though more evangelistic: “these [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

lifelong. Actually, it's eternal lifelong. And it's relational. To believe in the name of Jesus isn't just to believe he existed, or that he's the Son of God. To believe in Jesus is to know him and trust him. If you do that, you have eternal life.

In verses 14 and 15, John wants his readers to know that they can have confidence that their prayers are answered. But the key is praying according to God's will. We can't pray for things that are opposed to what God wants and expect God to respond positively to our prayers. We shouldn't pray, "Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?" God isn't a coddling father who gives in to the demands of a spoiled child. God wants us to pray according to what he has revealed in his word, the Bible. The great theologian John Calvin wrote this in his commentary on this passage:

God has promised to do whatsoever his people may ask, yet he does not allow them an unbridled liberty to ask whatever may come to their minds; but he has at the same time prescribed to them a law according to which they are to pray. And doubtless nothing is better for us than this restriction; for if it was allowed to every one of us to ask what he pleased, and if God were to indulge us in our wishes, it would be to provide very badly for us. . . . But God supplies a twofold remedy, lest we should pray otherwise than according to what his own will has prescribed; for he teaches us by his word what he would have us to ask, and he has also set over us his Spirit as our guide and ruler, to restrain our feelings, so as not to suffer them to wander beyond due bounds.⁵

In short, if we really know God, if we have the Holy Spirit guiding us, and if we know God's word, we're not likely to ask for things contrary to what he wants.

God doesn't have to answer our prayers. God really doesn't need our prayers. God knows everything. He knows our needs. He knows what we're going to pray before we do. He already knows how he'll respond. But God has ordained our prayers. They are part of his plans. According to another theologian, "Prayer is the means that God uses to give his people what he wants."⁶ If we pray according to God's will, we know he hears us and he will grant our requests. The whole key is knowing God so you well that you know his will.⁷

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 266.

⁶ Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 299. Jesus often talked about praying according to his name, which means according to all that he is, including his teachings. See John 14:13, 14; 15:16; 16:23.

⁷ Jesus was a great example of praying with confidence according to God's will. See John 11:39–44.

But John isn't giving us some general theology on prayer. He's not making some random comments at the end of his letter, trying to cover anything he might have forgotten earlier. He has something specific in mind. He's worried that some people in the churches he's writing to might not really believe in Jesus. Their disobedient actions might show that they are not Christians. For John, a Christian must have right beliefs, a right love for God and others, and right actions. Once someone has been "born of God," or transformed by God into a new type of person, he or she starts to live differently. That doesn't mean a Christian is perfect yet. But a Christian's life should line up with what they say they believe. If it doesn't, there may be a real problem.

Let's read verses 16–19:

¹⁶ If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. ¹⁷ All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.

¹⁸ We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.

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

Think about that last verse first. John says that "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one." The "evil one" is the devil, Satan. Jesus frequently called Satan "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; cf. 2 Cor. 4:4). Satan really doesn't rule the world; he is ultimately under God's control. But the "world" is under his sway. (Remember that John often writes "the world" when he's referring to the prevailing system of rebellion against God.) Throughout the letter, John says that there is a spiritual war taking place between God and Satan. Though we often don't realize it, we're caught up in that war. Christians are "from God," and they are protected by God. Satan cannot remove Christians from God or take away their eternal life. Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (3:8). So, we know who wins this war. But, still, it's a war and there are battles that are fought all around us.

John knows these battles are real and have real consequences: people who claim to be Christians may not actually be Christians. It's very easy to say you believe something. It's easy to make a confession that a pastor or other church leader wants to hear. It's easy to get baptized. But none of those things guarantees that a person is a Christian. John wants his readers to know the truth and cling to Christ. He's probably imagining a situation where someone in one of their

churches appears to be drifting from the faith. He's seen this before. He knows that those who left these churches proved that they were never Christians. He doesn't want this to happen to his readers.

With that in mind, John instructs his readers to pray for those who are sinning. He says that if you see a brother (or sister) "committing a sin not leading to death," you should ask God to give that person life. He must mean that we should pray that God would bring that person back to the right path, the path of obedience. After all, "everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning." God has the power to protect his own children from Satan's attacks, and even from their own sinful desires. So, pray that God would lead an erring brother or sister into repentance and obedience.

Now, I realize that the whole "sin that leads to death" comment is quite provocative. What sins don't lead to death, and which ones do? What does this mean?

First, the death isn't physical. All of us will die, including Christians. Yes, I suppose some sins we commit could bring that death upon us a lot quicker. But John doesn't mean that. He's referring to spiritual death, to condemnation.

Second, does this mean that some sins can't be forgiven, while other ones can? The Catholic Church teaches that there are venial sins and mortal sins. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, "Sins are rightly evaluated according to their gravity. The distinction between mortal and venial sin, already evident in Scripture, became part of the tradition of the Church." Interestingly, it cites this very passage as evidence.⁸ In Catholic thought, mortal sins are more serious and can send a person to hell unless the sinner performs penance. Venial sin is less serious and doesn't break covenant with God. But none of that is in view here. And the Bible teaches that any sin breaks the whole law of God (James 2:8–11).

Third, we would have to think about what the Bible says about forgiveness of sins to make sense of this passage. All we need to do is think back to the beginning of John's letter. Earlier, he writes, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1:9). John says that the one who confesses sin to Jesus is cleansed of all unrighteousness. There's no hint that some sins can't be forgiven.

⁸ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 454.

Fourth, remember John's main concerns in this letter. He wants to make sure that his readers don't go the way of antichrists. With that in mind, the sin that leads to death must be to reject the true Jesus.

We can pray for Christians to get back on the right path. We know that if they are in Christ, there is nothing that can keep them from eternal life. But there will be no eternal life for the ones who reject Jesus. That doesn't mean we can't pray for their salvation. But, even in Scripture, there are times when people don't pray for the lost. The prophet Jeremiah was told not to pray for idolatrous Israel (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). And Jesus said he didn't pray for the world (John 17:9). God's judgment against those who willfully, persistently, and rebelliously reject Jesus is a lack of prayer for their souls.

The overall point is that we live, in the words of the apostle Paul, in this "present evil age" (Gal. 1:4). Though Satan cannot remove us from Christ, we have to be careful. We are surrounded by temptations. We are surrounded by lies. We need to take care to know the real Jesus, to follow him, and to watch out for each other. If we see each other drifting away, we should pray, and we should act by speaking the truth in love to each other.

Fortunately, Jesus protects his sheep from the enemy. And not only does he do that, but he gives us a true understanding of God. Let's look at verse 20:

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. He is the true God and eternal life.

Part of why Jesus came was to give us a clearer understanding of who God is. He gives us understanding "so that we may know him who is true," that is, the Father. The word translated as "understanding" is sometimes translated as "mind."⁹ Elsewhere in the New Testament, we're told to love God with our whole mind (Mark 12:30), that God puts his law into the minds of believers (Heb. 8:10), and that we should "prepare [our] minds for action (1 Pet. 1:13). In Christianity, knowing the truth is very important. Jesus came to teach us the truth about God. He *is* the truth (John 14:6). And those who know Jesus know the truth.

Not only is he the truth, but he's God. That's what it says at the end of verse 20: "He is the true God and eternal life." Some people think the antecedent of "he" must be God the Father. That's possible, but "his Son Jesus Christ" is closer. Also, the Greek behind "He" in that last

⁹ Greek: δίανοια.

sentence of verse 20 translates a Greek word that really means “this one.”¹⁰ About two-thirds of the time that John uses that word, it refers to Jesus. It never refers to the Father.¹¹ So, grammatically, it makes best sense to see it as a reference to Jesus. And John has already called Jesus eternal life (1:2). So, he is most likely referring to Jesus here. Also, if John called God the Father the true God, well, the people who left these churches would agree. But John wants to drive home the point that Jesus is God, something the false teachers wouldn’t believe. That’s something that he says in his Gospel, too (John 1:1; 20:28).

That’s so important. Some people still deny that Jesus is God. Here’s a true story: last week, I posted the text of a presentation that I gave at Bridgewater State University last fall to students attending an InterVarsity meeting. I told them about who God is, using the language of “I am.” In the Old Testament, God calls himself “I am,” and in the New Testament Jesus uses this same language.¹² Well, I posted this on the church website and also on my personal blog, which I don’t use much. And someone, who goes by the name “Christadelphians,” made a comment, saying that Jesus isn’t God because that would mean we have three Gods. His comment seemed to suggest he didn’t understand the basic doctrine of the Trinity, that there is one God who exists in three Persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. And he also didn’t seem to understand that Jesus has two natures, one divine and one human. At any rate, Christadelphians are like Jehovah’s Witnesses in that they deny that Jesus is truly God.

But the Bible is clear that Jesus is God, and it matters. If Jesus isn’t God, we don’t have a Savior who is eternal, unchanging, perfect, completely trustworthy, and capable of saving us. We cannot redefine Jesus. His identity is described in the Bible and if we know Jesus, we will agree with the testimony of God.

And I think that’s why John ends with this last verse, verse 21: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” Before, I used to think this was a general warning against idols, or false gods. We must worship the one true God, not a fake God. While that’s true, now I see something more specific. When John mentions idols, he probably means false views of Jesus. Yes, we can’t make anything else our functional god, whether it’s money or entertainment or power or politics or a person we love. But given the context of this letter, John probably means that we cannot

¹⁰ οὗτος.

¹¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 327.

¹² “Who Is God?” <http://wbcommunity.org/who-is-god>.

worship a false Jesus. If we deny Jesus' divinity or his humanity, we make a false Jesus. If we reduce Jesus to a myth, or a mere prophet, or a wise teacher, we're making an idol. The real Jesus is the Jesus of the Bible. We have to consult the fullness of Scripture's witness to Jesus in order to know the real God-man, the real Lord and Savior.

Now that we've covered the whole book of 1 John, I want to ask us some questions.

First, are you sure you have eternal life? Do you trust you will live with God forever? Do you know Jesus? Are you living the life of a Christian? John says a Christian has right thoughts about Jesus, that a Christian really trusts him for salvation and guidance. John also says a Christian loves God and others—and remember, this love really isn't a feeling. It's a disposition of the heart that leads to actions. And John says Christians obey Christ. These marks of a Christian aren't subjective feelings. They are objective things that can be measured in our lives.

Second, when you pray, do you pray according to God's will? Do you let what God has revealed in the Bible dictate the content of your prayers? More specifically, when you see another Christian sin, what is your first response? Do you pray for that person? Or do you complain, gossip, and worry?

Third, do you have a right view of Jesus? Do you believe the Jesus of the Bible, not a Jesus made in your own image? Do you truly understand who Jesus is? If not, I would love to talk to you. I would love to sit down and read Scripture with you. I would love to give you resources that can help you understand who Jesus is and what he's done for us. We exist to know and worship God, and we cannot do that without knowing and worshiping Jesus.

And, fourth, speaking of idols, is there anything other than Jesus more important to you? What is it that you most want? What is it that you think you must have to be happy, successful, secure, satisfied? What do you find yourself daydreaming about or getting most upset about?

The things of this world will pass away, but God remains forever. The only way to have enduring joy, satisfaction, peace, meaning, and life is to know Jesus and follow him. Please, I urge you, put your trust in Jesus and do what he says.