

1 JOHN

Part 6: “When You Know the End of the Story”

1 John 2:28—3:10

By David A. Ritchie

Sunday, June 18, 2023 (Ordinary Time, Father’s Day)

Scripture Reading

“And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him. See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will 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. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother” (1 John 2:28–3:10).

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, we thank you for your word, and we are thankful that we can call upon you as our Father in heaven. On this Father’s Day, we thank you for the gift of fathers. I pray your blessing upon the fathers of this church and pray that those same fathers would bless the families of this church. May the fathers of this church exude the strength, courage, kindness, wisdom, and gentleness that reflect your character as our heavenly Father. I also pray comfort and healing for those who have lost fathers and those who have strained relationships with their fathers or children. I pray that today, as we delve into your word, that you would remind us of how you have loved us with a perfect fatherly love, how you have adopted us, and how you have called us your children. We pray this in Jesus’s mighty name.

AMEN.

Introduction

My oldest son Solomon was born just a month after I became the pastor here at Redeemer Christian Church. Kate and I were first-time parents learning on the fly about nap times, sleep rhythms, feeding, and diaper changing. And on top of all of that, we were re-planting a growing church that required an immense amount of attention and care.

Soon, we looked up for air and realized that it had been not just weeks but months since we had a date when we truly spent face-to-face time connecting with one another. But at long last, we had the opportunity to go on a date night. So we planned to go out for dinner and a movie.

And there happened to be a film showing in theaters at the time that was getting a lot of good press. So, my wife told me, I bet I know the movie you will want to see. She said, “You want to go see, *Lincoln* [show **iLincoln**], don’t you?”

The film *Lincoln* recounts the final year of the presidency of Abraham Lincoln as he leads the Union through the final moments of the Civil War and fights to pass the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which officially outlawed slavery in the United States.

On the surface, this movie has all the things I could ever hope for and love in a film. Daniel Day-Lewis starred as President Lincoln, and he even looked exactly like him. Steven Spielberg was the director, and the great John Williams even composed the film score. Plus, this was a film about one of the great men and great moments of history. Of course, my wife assumed, I would want to see this on our date night.

So Kate was shocked when I told her I would prefer to see something else, if possible. Again, it had been a long and hard season of life, and I wanted to watch a film I could escape into. She asked, “Well, why not this one?” And I said, “Here’s the thing: I’m pretty sure I know how *Lincoln* is going to end—and I pretty sure the ending is not a happy one.”

You see, when you know the *end* of the story, it shapes the way you experience and interact with the *rest* of the story. You’re going to carry a sense of dread if you know that story will end in heartache and pain. But you will experience a sense of joyful anticipation if you know that a story will end in triumph.

This truth bears on today’s Scripture reading because today’s passage reminds us that Christians already know the end of the story. And it’s not just that we know how the *Bible* ends—we know how the drama of *history* will end! We know that there is a day when Jesus will return, and when he returns, he will right all wrongs and make all things new!

And as we walk through today's passage, we will discover the power that comes **"When You Know the End of the Story."**

This power comes in three forms: **1.) The Power of Christian Hope, 2.) The Power of Christian Identity, and 3.) The Power of Christian Practice.** And as we will see, these three ideas are very much interwoven, flow from one another, and relate to one another.

Exposition

1) The Power of Christian Hope

The Apostle John is an old man by the time he writes the letter of 1 John, and he is the last of the living disciples. John did not just know Jesus during the time of Jesus's earthly ministry. He was a member of Jesus's inner circle of disciples and arguably Jesus's best friend.

You might think that because he was so close to Jesus that he would be less likely to take Jesus seriously and more likely to be too familiar with Jesus and even disrespectful of Jesus. After all, that is how many people treat those with whom they are the most comfortable. But the Bible shows us that the opposite was true in the case of John and Jesus. The more John knew Christ, the more he was filled with a sense of awe and holy fear of Christ.

Early in the book of Revelation, John records a vision where he beholds a vision of Jesus in glory. In the vision, Christ is robed in majesty, his hair is snow white, his eyes are bright as burning fire, and the sound of his voice is like the sound of many rushing waters (Rev 1:13–16). At this moment, John does not belittle Jesus or joke around with him as if he were an old friend from high school. Instead, John falls before Christ's feet in worship (Rev 1:17).

Yet, as terrifying and overwhelming as the glory of Christ is, John ends the book of Revelation with a hope-filled yearning for the day that Christ will come. He longs for the day the full glory of Christ appears to all. Indeed some of the final words of Revelation are a pining prayer that says, "Amen. *Come, Lord Jesus*" (Rev 22:20). In other words, John's ultimate response to the glory of Christ is *hope*.

So too, here in 1 John, the apostle is telling his readers if you truly abide in Christ, you will not live in a way that trivializes or dishonors the name of Christ. If you abide in him, live in a way that is mindful of the promise that Christ will return again. You will live in a way that exudes a confidence that rests in a sure hope.

John writes, **"And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming" (1 John 2:28).**

There are essentially two responses we can have to the promise of Christ's return. We can either be filled with a *fear of judgment* or a *fear of the Lord*.

The fear of judgment is what John describes as shrinking back "in shame" at the coming of Christ. It arises from the knowledge that we are living in sin. The fear of judgment comes from knowing that we are doing things in the dark that, were they to be brought into the light, would fill us with shame and disgrace. It is what happens when we dishonor God in the thoughts we think, the words we speak, and the actions we do. Thus fear comes from a knowledge that we are actively participating in the very evil that Christ has come to vanquish. Fear of judgment would cause us to shrink back or recoil from the coming of Christ.

The fear of the Lord is different; it is what allows us to behold the appearing of Lord, as John says, "in confidence."

The fear of the Lord flows from an awestruck wonder before who God has revealed himself to be in Christ. The fear of the Lord is not a cowering fear; it is amazement combined with profound reverence. It is the natural response to the dual revelation of God's abundant mercy and his infinite power.

There are no analogies within all of creation that can adequately convey the glory of the Lord. But I do believe that creation is constantly declaring the glory of God (cf. Ps 19:1), and I believe our response to creation's song of worship mimics the way the fear of the Lord *feels*. The fear of the Lord feels like what you feel when you stand before an ocean with waves that are swelling and surging in power. It is the feeling of the sublime that you sense when you stand at the peak of a tall mountain or gaze into a clear night sky filled with trillions of stars.

The fear of the Lord reminds us of the fleetingness of our lives and the limitations of our power. But the fear of the Lord also recalibrates our hearts to live in light of what matters most in the scope of eternity. The fear of the Lord fills us with a longing to truly know the Lord and behold his beauty.

And the Bible tells us that when we live in a mindful awareness of God's holiness, power, and goodness, that knowledge gives us wisdom and confidence. As the book of Proverbs reminds us, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 9:10), and in the fear of the Lord, there is strong confidence (Prov 14:26). Psalm 25 tells us that the friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him (Ps 25:14).

What does hope have to do with all of this?

Hope is what happens with our vision of the future is framed by the fear of the Lord. Hope is the confident expectation that there is a day coming when our gloriously powerful God will bring forth perfect justice, heal all wounds, restore all that is broken, and make all things new.

This is the end of our story. And knowing the end of our story fuels your heart with a sure hope that will necessarily radically reshape the way you live now.

But this should cause us to reflect on our lives. Is the hope of God's eternal glory before your mind and imagination on a daily basis?

How often do you think about the return of Jesus Christ, and are you living in light of the expectation of his "appearing" (παρουσία)?

What is forming your vision of the future, and how is your expectation of the future causing you to live in the present?

2) **The Power of Christian Identity**

Some of you may remember me telling the story of my first real job. Long before, I was a pastor, and while I was a student in college, I sold cell phones for a company that was then named Cingular Wireless. That company has since then merged into and become AT&T Wireless (which is now famous for never having reception and dropping calls on Soncy Road).

I was an external agent meaning that I sold Cingular's service and plans, but I sold the actual phones in different stores and like Best Buy and Sam's Club. On my first day, I went to Best Buy for my training. I was assigned to a certain coworker who showed me the ropes of the job, and he taught me how to retrieve inventory and write up a contract. But he did more than that. He went out of his way to let me know of his personal strategy to work as little as possible. He even showed me how to look like he was working when he wasn't working. After all, every now and then, we would get a visit from one of the many Cingular managers. And he while didn't like to work, he also didn't want to be fired.

So, one of our managers came into our store on my first day, and my coworker went into his routine of pretend-work and told me to do the same. But I ignored his advice, and instead, I walked up to the manager, shook his hand, and gave him a big bear hug—because he was my *dad*.

As time went on, I found it rather easy to do a much better job selling phones than the coworker who trained me. After all, my coworker seemed like he only wanted to do the minimum to keep his job.

Now, don't get me wrong. I wanted to work in order to earn money and save. But part of my motivation to excel at this job came from the fact that I loved my dad. I wanted to make him proud. I wanted to be about my father's business. And in this way, what I did simply flowed from who I was as my father's son.

So too, the Apostle John will show us how Christian behavior is a function of Christian identity. In other words, how we act derives from who we believe we are.

John teaches us that, for Christians, our righteousness does not flow from mere willpower or mental exertion or a fretful fear to avoid eternal punishment. Our righteousness flows from being spiritually reborn as children of God. he writes, *“If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him. See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him”* (1 John 2:29–3:1.)

If you trust in Jesus, you are not just *called* a child of God. You *are* a child of God. You have been chosen! You have been redeemed! You have been adopted into the very family of God!

Now, you may not always *feel* like a child of God. And the world around you may not treat you like you are a child of God. But don't worry; the world didn't even treat Jesus like a child of God either!

Being a child of God is not about what you *feel*—it is about what God has declared to be *true*. Our adoption into God's family is not an earned identity or status. It is given by God himself and proclaimed by his very word.

The God who said, “let there be light” (Gen 1:3) and called forth light into existence, has called you his child. If God says you are his child, you are his child. God's word is the most powerful force in all of reality. And his word—and the identity give to you by his work—is more powerful and more true than your greatest sin.

And when our present Christian identity connects with the future promise of Christian hope, they combine together to create a powerful spiritual force that sanctifies us and conforms us more and more to the image of Christ: *“Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will 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. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”* (1 John 3:2–3).

Listen to what John is saying here: the more we behold Jesus, the more we hope in Jesus, and the more we believe in Jesus, we are not just becoming more like Jesus. We are becoming the truest version of ourselves. Indeed, only by embracing our identity in Christ will we discover who we were truly destined to be (cf. Rom 8:29). This is the end of your story.

That doesn't mean that, once you become a Christian, you will be perfect in this life. We will most certainly stumble and fall, but when we rest in the truth of our identity as children of God and the hope of our future glory, we will be emboldened to stumble toward Jesus rather than away from him. And when we look back on our lives, after years of trusting Jesus, we will often be astonished at the slow and steady transformation that the Spirit of God has wrought within us.

John Newton [show **2John Newton**] was a man who knew all about the life-changing power that flows from having a new identity and a new hope in Christ. He was once the captain of a slave ship that transported enslaved human beings as nothing more than property. But even in the depths of his depravity and sin, the Lord rescued him.

Newton repented of his sin and became a Christian. He became an Anglican priest and an abolitionist. And he even penned the words to the famous Christian hymn “Amazing Grace.”

But he was also the author of several letters that he wrote to his parishioners, giving them pastoral advice and encouragement. And in one of those letters, he wrote a short paragraph that has stayed with me as a powerful source of inspiration that is rooted in Christian hope and identity.

He writes, *“I am not who I ought to be. I am not who I want to be. I am not who I will be. But, praise God, I am not who I was—and, by the grace of God, I am who I am.”*

3) The Power of Christian Practice

Christians believe we are saved by God's grace, not by our works of righteousness. But there is a very big difference between saying our works of righteousness don't matter. Our acts of righteousness, or what we might call *the practice* of righteousness, matter very much.

In fact, John has some pretty sobering words to say about this subject. He says, *“Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him”* (1 John 3:4–6).

Now, at first glance, you could read this passage and think, “Well, this means if I sin, that means I am not a really a Christian, I never knew God, and I might as well stop trying.” Someone might even use this passage in isolation to argue for a staunch, graceless form of legalism.

But this passage is not arguing that you have to be absolute perfect to be a Christian. After all, earlier in this same letter, John himself reminded us of the good news that if we confess our sins, Christ is faithful and just to forgive us (1 John 1:9). He has told us that Christ is our advocate and the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 2:1–2)!

So, if John isn't telling us that we must walk in sinless perfection to be a Christian, what is he really saying?

I believe he is asking us to take a hard look at the regular practices and habits of our lives. And we should be willing to honestly evaluate if the regular practices and habits of our lives are shaped by our hope and the identity we have been given in Christ or

whether they reveal we truly have another hope or another identity that is outside of Christ.

We should not be deceived into thinking that we are Christ-followers if we follow a way that is antithetical to who he is and who he has called us to be. Verse 7 tells us, *“Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother”* (1 John 3:7–10).

Christians are not meant to walk in righteousness as a way to earn our own salvation. Rather, we are to walk in righteousness toward God and in love toward one another in response to the God who has loved us, saved us, given us new life, and imputed to us the righteousness of his son. We are to practice righteousness in light of who God has called us to be and destined us to be.

So you may ask yourself, *“Are my habits in line with my hope? What type of person are my daily practices causing me to become? Am I living in light of the end of the story”*

C.S. Lewis said it this way, *“Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different than it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature: either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.”*

Conclusion

Again, there is power in knowing the end of the story.

But it is also important to know that this world is constantly trying to convince you of alternative stories. This world is vying for the affections and allegiances of your heart and wants to enchant you with a hope that is different than the hope of Christ. The world wants you to embrace an identity that is outside of Christ and adopt practices contrary to Christ.

That is why we so desperately need to recalibrate our hearts by regularly reading Scripture. That is why we need to commune with the Spirit of God in prayer. That is why

we need to gather in worship together as a way to press the story of the gospel and the final hope of the gospel into our hearts.

The spiritual disciplines of reading Scripture, prayer, gathering for worship, sitting under the expounding and teaching of God's word, and the receiving of sacraments rehearse and remind us of the hope we have in Christ. They remind us of who Christ is, what Christ has done for us, who we are in Christ, and how we are to live for Christ.

Outside of Christ, the end of our story was despair and death. But because of Christ, the end of our story is a beacon of light that can lead us through whatever darkness today can bring us.

For Christ endured the depths of despair in his suffering on the cross so that we might have hope that will not fail.

He was the Son of God who experienced rejection so that we might be received and given a place in the family of God.

He is the righteous judge of the living and the dead who will one day appear in glory. But he was also the one who received judgment in our place that we might be given the gift of his righteousness.

If you are in Christ, if you trust in Christ, you no longer need to shrink and fear the notion of his return. For God has called you his child! And on this Father's Day, regardless of what your relationship with your earthly father may be now, the word of God reminds us that we have been loved by our heavenly Father perfectly.

You are God's child *now*. You may not always feel that way. You may not always look that way. But we know the end of the story—Jesus is coming back. And when he appears, we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is. And when your hope is in him, you will be purified even as he is pure.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, let's live knowing that this is the end of our story.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. Read 1 John 2:28—3:10.
2. How does knowing the end of a story affect the way we experience and interact with the rest of the story? Can you provide examples from your own life or other narratives?
3. Can you think of any practical steps or habits we can develop to keep the hope of Christ's return at the forefront of our minds and hearts on a daily basis? How can we foster a mindset that consistently lives in anticipation of the future glory that awaits us?
4. Why is it essential to understand and embrace your identity in Christ and the hope that comes with it? How does this affect the way Christians live their lives?
5. How do our daily practices and habits reflect our hope and our identity in Christ? How can we evaluate if our actions align with our Christian beliefs?