

Sharing in God's Victory (Part Four)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 June 2015

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] There's a cognitive scientist by the name of Donald Hoffman. Maybe you've seen the TED Talk he gave not too long ago. He spends his career, he spent his career as of late, investigating a single question.

And this question he actually believes is the most important question we can ask. Because the answer to this question undergirds all other questions and answers.

And that is this. Do we see reality as it is? Do we see reality as it is? Are our perceptions accurate?

It's an important question. Because our perception of reality, as Hoffman would say, our entire ability to survive as a species, to flourish as a species, is directly related to our perception of reality.

We've been looking at 1 John, which is one of the letters that the Apostle John wrote to the church. We've been looking at this since January, I think.

[1 : 15] And at the very end of this letter, which is where we've come to, now here in June, we come to the end of the letter and we see that John is actually asking the exact same question.

That Hoffman asks. And what we realize is that this question about reality isn't just a science question. Actually, more fundamentally, it's a spiritual question.

Do we see reality as it is? You know, what's interesting is that a lot of people who are not religious, they view religion, in particular a faith like Christianity, as being a way of escaping reality.

But in fact, when you began to investigate the core claims of Christianity, what you see is that Christianity is very much concerned with our ability to perceive reality as it is.

And in fact, it would say that one of our most fundamental problems is that we are on our own unable to do so. But John would say the very same thing, that our ability to survive, any chance we hope to have of flourishing is directly related to whether or not we perceive reality as it is.

[2 : 25] And so in chapter 5, verses 18 through 21, John is closing his letter out, and he wants to end with these three powerful statements.

And Diana, if you don't have it up, I'd love for you to have that up there so you can see it. And each of these statements begins with the words, we know. And it's as though John is saying, here at the very end, I want to leave you with the, here are the foundational things that we know.

And what he's really saying is, if we want to see reality for what it is, then we need these three great truths which act like anchors. Each of these things anchors us in reality.

The first anchor concerns our identity. The second anchor concerns our world. And the third anchor concerns our hope.

So we're going to look at each of those in more detail. Let's pray for God to help us as we understand his word. Lord, we do recognize, as we said a moment ago, that your promise is to speak.

[3 : 31] And that even though you're the God who created the heavens and the earth, even though in many ways you are unfathomable, that you speak in ways that we can understand. And we pray that tonight you would do just that.

And I ask for my own heart, my own sake, and for all of us here that we would have hearts that are open to your word. We pray this for your glory, Lord, in your son's name.

Amen. So this first anchor that anchors us to reality, such that we can perceive it accurately, concerns our identity.

Let's read verse 18. He says, We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who is born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.

So what he's saying is the first anchor concerns our identity. And he says very simply, If you're a Christian, then you have been born of God.

[4 : 36] And you say, Well, I know. We've talked about this many times. I know this. I've heard it. I've heard it. More than I can count. But I want to reflect on this, because what he's talking about is not a physical birth, but a spiritual birth.

And the verb that he's talking about, the verb born, is in a tense that conveys the fact that it is a once and for all thing. That once it happens, it is done.

And the implications of that reality continue into eternity. So he's saying that by believing in Jesus, by admitting that you need his grace and forgiveness, you're actually born again into the family of God, and you actually become a child of God.

This is your anchor. You may have been here weeks back when we talked about the example of Wilfredo Garza, who was, all of his adult life, he lived as an illegal immigrant, and he would sneak across the border, and he would hide, and he would work odd jobs, and he would get paid next to nothing, and he would hide out, and he couldn't go out in public because he was afraid of getting caught, and he got caught multiple times, and every time he would get caught, he would get taken back to Mexico, and then as soon as he could, he would sneak back across the border.

And this is how he lived his entire adult life. And finally, he got sick of sneaking around, and got sick of constantly being caught, and he went into an immigration office, an immigration lawyer, to ask what it would take for him to become a citizen.

[6 : 04] And they did a little research, and they actually found out that his father had been born in Texas, and that the entire time, he was a U.S. citizen, and they had the papers to prove it.

But he had been living like an illegal immigrant. So there are many, many, many of us, many people who are Christians, who have that status, but who live like we're illegal immigrants.

What makes you a Christian is not that you believe in God. Most people believe in God. You know, what makes you a Christian is not that you want to be a good person, and do good things.

Most people want that. There are many people who, by the world's standards, are better people than Christians I know, myself included. You know?

And what makes you a Christian is not that you think that you're a Christian, because what John is saying is that Christians have absolute certainty. A Christian is, by definition, somebody who says, I know that I'm a Christian because I was born that way.

[7 : 06] I was born this way. I look back not to intellectual assents so much as a rebirth. I know who my father is. And because I know who my father is, I know where I stand before him.

Right? That's what J.I. Packer says. The simplest definition of what it means to be a Christian is that it's someone who can call God father. And with this new status comes a new kind of life.

That's why Joan goes on to say, people born of God do not keep on sinning. Now, this doesn't mean perfectionism. This doesn't mean that Christians don't sin or have sin in their lives.

Of course they do. And in fact, many of you probably know this. The longer that you're a follower of Jesus, the more mature that you grow in your faith, the more you see the reality of sin in your life.

Not less, but more. You see it in places that you didn't used to see it. And that's how you know you're growing in your faith. So that's not what John is talking about. The verb that he uses implies a kind of ongoing, habitual, continuous approach to life that really embodies the meaning of sin.

[8 : 13] Sin, most basically, is this. It's ignoring God and the world that he made. And so John is saying, if you know that you've been born of God, if you know that he is your father, then you wouldn't live in such a way that you ignore him.

It just wouldn't make sense. You know, you would think that once Wilfredo found out that he, in fact, had the status of a citizen, that he would start to live as a citizen, that his life would be changed.

And I think it was dramatically changed. And the same is true of us. Once we know that we have the status of being a child of God, it changes our life. Now, if that discourages you, if you think, well, you know, I look at my life and I don't see much difference, the end of verse 18 should be really encouraging to you.

Because John goes on to say, if we're born of God, then Jesus, the one begotten of the Father, protects us. Now, this is an amazing statement. Jesus protects us.

So what he's saying about you is if you're a Christian, if you've been born of God, then Jesus guards you. He keeps you. He protects you. He's the sentry that stands guard over your life, day and night.

[9 : 29] You know, I read this and it reminded me of Luke chapter 22, verse 31, where Jesus says to Simon Peter, he says, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat.

But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, not if, when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers. brothers, no matter what, if you belong to God, you're under the protection of Jesus Christ.

And this evil one that John has talked about so much can't lay a finger on you. And actually, the word touch is actually that word is more accurately translated grasp or ignite.

No matter what, he cannot take hold of you. This truth, I believe, anchors us in reality, the idea that Jesus keeps us.

Many of you know that, you know, I had to go home this past week, very last minute, because my mom had, basically they realized that she had a major blockage in a coronary artery and she had to have emergency bypass surgery.

[10 : 53] And so, and so, we heard this and Laura and I decided that we needed to go down there and be with the family and so we, we drove down and, and we were there during the surgery and, and it was a fascinating experience.

Obviously, I was thinking about this passage as we were sitting there in the hospital waiting room and I'd been kind of meditating on it the last few weeks and, and it was interesting because most of my family are, are not, would not consider themselves to be Christians.

and so we're all sitting in this waiting room and, you know, our, we sort of took over one wing of the waiting rooms. We're all, you know, you know, this motley crew, my family, we're all kind of gathered there and people are in the midst of waiting to hear how the surgery is going, knowing that because of some pre-existing health conditions that my mom was at much greater risk of dying.

So we're all sitting there trying to face and make sense of the possibility that we might lose her on the operating table or in some complication following surgery. And I was so keenly aware during that time of the difference that Christian hope like this makes in a situation like that because I was scared and by the way, thank you so much for all of you who prayed and, and sent encouraging words.

I mean, we, you know, we absolutely felt your prayer so I deeply appreciate that and maybe it was your prayer, maybe that, maybe the Lord, one of the ways that the Lord answered your prayer for us was to take this verse and use it to speak to me because as I was sitting there, even though I was aware of the fear of losing my mom who I love deeply, the, the, the fear of that loss and how tremendously devastating that would be, underneath that, there was a deep assurance and I kept coming back to this, I know that my mom belongs to Jesus, I know that she's a Christian and because of that, I know that Jesus keeps her, and what that means is, is that death has no hold on her and though she may pass away, the day will come when she will be given a new body and a new heart and I know with certainty that I will be with her for eternity and I felt this truth anchoring me in reality in a situation where it's very easy to lose track of what's real and to get caught up in the fear and in the panic and I felt this holding me down on the ground, holding me there when it would be so easy to be blown this way and that.

[13 : 21] So this is the first anchor for those of us who are Christians. Our identity is first and foremost that we've been born once and for all into God's family and we're under the protection of Jesus Christ. The second anchor concerns the truth that John gives us about this world.

You know, his depiction of the world is kind of dark. It's actually appropriate that there's a thunderstorm going on right now. You know, it sets the appropriate mood for where we're going here. Verse 19, he says this, we know that we are from God and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

And I want you to see this stark contrast here. There's a contrast. If you feel uncomfortable, I think he's trying to make us uncomfortable. He says, on the one hand, we are from God.

And by we, he means anybody who is a Christian who's born of God. And he says, but the world lies in the power of the evil one. And I want us to think about, you know, this kind of black and white distinction, you very rarely see this and that's because, frankly, we don't like this kind of distinction.

I don't like this kind of distinction. If you know anything about me, I love nuance. I love to say, well, things are much more complicated than that. I draw great comfort. You know, my favorite color is gray in many ways.

[14 : 40] And so I read this and it challenges me because John is saying, fundamentally, under all the nuance and under all the lack of clarity and under all the intellectual humility, that there is a line in the sand.

You know, as C.S. Lewis wrote, there are only two kinds of people in the end, those who say to God, thy will be done and those to whom God says in the end, thy will be done. Or there's another way to put it and that is that there are people who insist on substituting themselves for God.

And there are people who recognize that that's what's wrong with the world. They put off that way of life and recognize that their hope rests in the fact that God has substituted himself for us.

This is the definition of sin. I substitute myself for God. This is the definition of salvation. God substituted himself for me. And John is saying, either your life is based on one or it's based on the other of these realities.

So the distinction, I think, between those two kinds of people has largely been blurred in our culture. I mean, for a very, very, very long time. You know, until now, most people called themselves Christians in our culture, even though a good number of them had no idea what that really meant.

[16 : 05] If you grew up in the South, you know particularly well what this looks like. But what you see is a country where Christian faith in the gospel and patriotism and politics, national identity, they've been so conflated and so intermingled that it's very easy to confuse one for the other.

I know I've told the story before of being overseas in a largely Southeast Asian population and we were doing religious knowledge surveys and one of our questions was, where was Jesus born?

And the majority of people we asked said, the United States. You know, that's the kind of confusion that has existed up to now, right? But that's changing and what we're seeing in our country now for the first time is that the cultural cost of labeling yourself a Christian outweighs the cultural benefit.

And so you have a lot of people who used to check Christian on the survey who are now checking the unaffiliated box. And a lot of Christians look at this and they lament it and oh my goodness and what does this mean and it's the death of Christianity.

Well I and others think this is absolutely the best thing that could possibly happen in our culture. Because now we're beginning to be able to see through the haze and the fog and in light of our original question we're able to see more clearly reality for what it is.

[17 : 30] You know, John says that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one and that word lies actually means to lie asleep. It's the word that you would use to lie on your back asleep in your bed.

So he's saying, you know, if you're a Christian Satan can't even touch you. You're under protection. We're under protection.

But if you're not, then you're asleep in the arms of the evil one. That's what he's saying. You know, I hate to reference it because it's been used a lot but you know, the best modern illustration of this is the movie The Matrix.

You know, with the fundamental premise is people are going about their lives and eating and drinking and working and having families and all of that and unbeknownst to them they're actually lying asleep in service to this great evil.

Right? And the only way to escape that is for there to be an intervention where somebody comes in from the outside and wakes you up and sets you free and then, you know, there's that great line from Morpheus to Neo when he's first freed, you know, welcome to the world of the real.

[18 : 43] Now you're seeing reality for what it really is and it's a horror show. And so what John is saying is that that's what we need. The world lies asleep in the arms of evil and Christians are simply those people who have been awakened.

So if our first anchor that helps us see reality accurately is that we're born of God and that he protects us, the second anchor is this, we live in exile.

We live as Christians in a world that is fundamentally hostile to God and often hostile to those who belong to God.

And apart from God's saving grace, human beings are spiritually ignorant. If you want to think about implications of this, there are lots of implications. One maybe particularly relevant implication for us is this is why Christians only marry Christians.

You know, I mean, a lot of people hear that and they think that's insane and that's crazy and that's why would you even think of it that way these days. You know, if I meet a person and we really love each other and we really get along and we have a lot of things in common, then surely we can just agree to disagree when it comes to faith.

[20 : 01] But John would say, you're not seeing reality for what it is. You're not seeing things clearly. He would say, it may seem like that's not a big deal. But if you're seeing reality for what it is, what you would realize is that someone who has been born of God and awakened and set free from this cannot pledge themselves to somebody who is still spiritually asleep and hostile to that very same God.

You can't pledge yourselves to one another. And the reason is simple. Because you have a divided allegiance and you're each living in service to masters who are fundamentally opposed.

It's an impossibility. You know, Christian values and ethics and priorities make absolutely no sense to someone if they're still spiritually asleep.

They don't make sense. They don't fit at all. You can't justify them apart from the reality of Christ. And so people can't be reasoned into this faith. Even though it's an incredibly intellectually rich faith, you can't be reasoned alone into this faith.

The only hope, the only way is for someone to come in from the outside, Jesus Christ, and intervene in your life and wake you up. It's something only God can do.

[21 : 24] So the first anchor is this. We belong to God. We're under the protection of Jesus Christ if we're Christians. The second anchor is that we live in spiritual exile. And the third anchor kind of ties all these things together and it really concerns the nature of our hope.

Verses 20 and 21 say this, and we know that the Son of God has come and 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. And then verse 21, little children, keep yourselves from idols. Sounds like a total non-sequitur.

We'll get back to why He says that. But He's essentially saying this, what is our hope? Living in this kind of world? Well, the hope for this kind of world is this, that that intervention that we talked about, that He has come.

This intervention has come. The Son of God has come. And I want to make note of this, that He came to us, not the other way around. We didn't get to Him. There's nothing that we did that got us to Him.

[22 : 34] See, this is why you can't leave off with that last point I made. You can't just say, we've been awakened, but everybody around us is still asleep, because if we just said that, that would very quickly lead to all kinds of spiritual arrogance.

You know, that sounds like a very arrogant thing to say. I'm awake and I see reality and you don't. You know, you say that today and people will get really offended. This point is incredibly important because it helps us remember, there's nothing that I did.

The only reason that this is true of me, the only reason that this is true of you, is because God came into your life and awakened you. Spiritually brought you to life.

Wasn't anything you did, you don't deserve it, you'll never be able to repay it, that's why we call it grace. But there's been an intervention in your life and what the Bible tells us is that Jesus intends that intervention for all people, that this hope is meant for all people.

So, you know, Paul says in Ephesians 2, if this has happened to you, you have no reason to boast. You're no different than anybody else. And then John goes on to say that when he talks of Jesus, he refers to Jesus as he who is true.

[23 : 46] I'm talking about him who is true. And I think that's an interesting phrase that shows up a number of times. And when I looked it up and when I looked at the original word for this, this isn't the normal Greek word that means true or truth.

It's a word that more accurately means reality or real. This brings us back to our initial question. So he's actually saying, what he's saying is, here's the hope that we have, the real God has come to us.

The cornerstone of reality, the one who, when you put him at the center, he helps to make sense of everything else. That real God, that real being, the ultimate reality, has come to us.

And if you know that, that's why it helps to make sense of why John would go on to say, little children, keep yourselves from idols. This isn't an afterthought, it's an application. He's saying, listen, if the real God has come, you need to make very sure that you're not devoted to a fake God, a false God.

Because the real God is here. Guard yourself from the false God so that you can embrace and cling to and be in the real God. Now, we're going to talk about this more next week in depth.

[24 : 59] We're going to just spend our whole time, the last sermon in 1 John, we're going to look just at verse 21. But I want to give you one image or illustration to help make sense of what John's talking about here.

There's an insect called the Australian jewel beetle. jewel beetle. And the jewel beetle is distinctive because it's brown and glossy and has dimples all over the back of its shell.

Right? And they live in the outback and females are flightless and so the males fly around and they look for a suitable female, nice brown shell, nice looking dimples, you know, nice glossy sheen.

And when they find a hot female, they land and they mate. Right? Well, another thing that's been happening in the outback is trash buildup. And you have a lot of beer bottles that are just thrown out of cars.

What do beer bottles look like? They're brown, they're glossy, and they're dimpled around the bottom. The species has almost gone extinct.

[26 : 04] Why? It's because as the males are flying around, they see the beer bottle and the beer bottle has in appearance everything that they're looking for.

And so you have beer bottles with male beetles swarming over them trying to mate, trying to have union. And you have all these lonely females who are getting no attention because the males are rejecting the reality for the fantasy.

Now, this has enormous application value, right? I mean, we could just go all day. We could just riff until tomorrow about men leaving women for the bottle.

But more important, and I got that from Hoffman who said this, but more accurately, obviously, sexually speaking, this is a great example of exactly what pornography is doing in our culture, where men are increasingly choosing the fantasy over the reality.

They're choosing to attach themselves to something that isn't real, that only has the appearance of reality, and that is incapable of life-giving union rather than the real thing.

[27 : 18] But on a deeper, more spiritual level, this is actually a wonderful picture of idolatry. Because John is saying, you were made for one thing, union with Christ.

Your entire purpose, your entire reason for being here, your entire hope, your entire life is here. The entire gospel endeavor from Genesis to Revelation is all to make possible your union with Christ.

That's the whole thing. That's what it's all about, that you could know the fulfillment of what human life is for, and that has to be a part of the Trinity. And instead, again and again and again, we are choosing objects of devotion that have the appearance of a Savior, the appearance of something worth our devotion, but which are incapable of the life-giving union for which we were made.

We can go on and on with examples. We will more in detail next week. Good things, like your job or your desire for success, your family, your kids, things that are good, things that look shiny, you know, things that promise a lot, but things that ultimately, if you give yourself completely to them, will not give back.

They will only take. And John is saying, guard yourself from that. The real God has come. He's intervened.

[28 : 51] He's waking you up so that you will know him and be in him for all eternity. No substitute will do.

Don't settle. So coming back to our question at the beginning, are we able to see reality as it is? You know, can we cut through the haze?

Can we cut through the uncertainty and the confusion? The conflicting views about reality? Are we actually able to see things as they really are? The answer is yes. As long as we anchor ourselves with these truths.

First, that Christians are born of God and that if you're a Christian, you're once and for all God's child and you are under his protection. Second, that we live in exile.

The world is asleep, alienated from God, and only the intervening power of God himself can restore such a world. And the last anchor is this, the good news that that intervention has come.

[29 : 56] That reality himself has broken into the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. Let's pray.

Father, only you know where we are this evening and where our hearts are. There are some of us here who know this hope, who have the certainty of what it means to belong to you.

We experience your love. We know the richness of this relationship that we have with you. There are many of us here, Lord, some of us Christians and some of us not, who don't know this, who doubt it, who question it, who wrestle with it.

Lord, those of us who are afraid to hope that we might be disappointed, those of us who feel distant from you, disconnected, who wonder if you're even there, maybe even those of us who are angry at you or who hate you.

Lord, may we rest and may we hope in the fact that you have come, that you're here with us even as we sit in this space.

[31 : 07] And we pray that in only the way that you can do, you would make yourself known to us, that we would have the kind of union for which we were made.

And we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.