



## Thought for the Week 14<sup>th</sup> March 2021

### Reading: 1 John 5: 13-21 (NIV)

#### Concluding affirmations

*<sup>13</sup> I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. <sup>14</sup> This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him.*

*<sup>16</sup> If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that. <sup>17</sup> All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.*

*<sup>18</sup> We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them. <sup>19</sup> We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. <sup>20</sup> We know also 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 by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.*

*<sup>21</sup> Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.*

#### SERMON

During the past couple of months we have been looking at the first letter of the Apostle John. This book lies between the two larger books also written by John – his Gospel and Revelation. In the Gospel John outlines how things began with the earthly ministry of Jesus culminating in his death on the cross and victorious resurrection. In Revelation John is given a glimpse of how things will end when Jesus comes again. If these two books are like mountaintop experiences, then John's letter is all about how to live well in the valley between.

Whenever we feel close to God and all seems to be well with the world, we sometimes refer to it as a mountaintop experience, and we think it would be great to stay there for ever. However, in my limited experience of mountaintops (mostly in the Mourne on Donard, Commedagh, Bernagh and a few others when I was younger and fitter!) while the view is breath-taking and inspirational, they are really quite desolate places with few trees or plants for shelter and no water. We are not meant to live on mountaintops, but they can be the inspiration and the motivation for us to live well in the valley.

First John was written to a people who were in a valley - seeking to live with God in the realities and difficulties of work, illness, family problems and even divisions in the church. John wants to give his readers hope for the present and hope for the future and so he writes the words that we have been studying.

Today's reading from chapter 5 is entitled "concluding remarks" in the NIV Bible, while the ESV perhaps more helpfully calls it. "That you may know more." John wants to make it clear what God's people are up against and what our response is to be.

This afternoon, Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> March, Ireland will play Scotland in the Six Nations International Rugby Tournament. Like all good coaches, I am sure that Andy Farrell will have watched recordings of all Scotland's recent matches so that he will know what his team will be up against in the upcoming

game and he will have created a strategy in order for them to win. So too John is doing this for the believers in the churches he mentored as well as for us in these final eight verses of First John. He tells us what we are up against and what our response should be so that we can win.

So first - What are we up against?

John identifies four things that are against the ways of God - barriers, obstacles and stumbling blocks of which we need to be aware.

- Death - v. 16
- Sin - v. 16 & 17
- The Evil One and the world under his control – vv 18 & 19
- Idols that would take God's place in our lives - v. 21

As John has done throughout this book, he is not pointing out tourist attractions for us as spiritual pilgrims journeying through life, but instead he's making us aware of potholes, detours and other things that would keep us from moving on in the life God intends for us. If we allow these distractions to become the focus or to become prevalent in our life, we will end up under their influence and heading down the road of destruction. These potholes (if you like) that John identifies for us - death, sin, the evil one and the world under his control, as well as various idols, are all at odds with God's desire for us; but John doesn't just identify these and say, "*Good luck with all that. I hope you make it through.*" Instead, he tells us of the grace of God and the gifts that he gives to those who belong to Jesus.

- In opposition to death there is the sure and certain promise of eternal life in Jesus. v. 13
- In opposition to sin is the reality that people do not have to continue to sin. v. 18
- In opposition to the evil one, idols and the world is God's reminder that as his children we are under his fatherly protection. v. 21

And in verse 14 John reminds us that we can, with total confidence, come to God our loving heavenly Father in prayer, knowing that he hears us and answers our prayers.

John does not want us to live in the reality of what we are up against without telling us the gifts of God available to us, the gifts of eternal life. So, the question before each of us today is - where do you find yourself? Are you caught up in what the world has to offer? Do you find yourself in a lifestyle or in habits that hold you captive? Or is your life lived with and for God? And, if you are like me, you would probably have to say, yes, there are times, when God is evidenced in my life, times when I do believe, love and pursue righteousness.

But there are other times when that isn't the case at all! The desire and the discipline are sometimes there, but at other times they are not. So, before we look to see how John wants us to respond to all this, it is very important that you know that you are not alone. You aren't the only one today who has this struggle and that this struggle is not a new one in our modern-day world. In fact, this struggle was there in one of Jesus' earliest and closest followers. He writes:

*<sup>15</sup>I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." <sup>16</sup>And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup>As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. <sup>18</sup>I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. <sup>19</sup>For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing. <sup>20</sup>Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but is sin living in me that does it.*

*<sup>21</sup>So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. <sup>22</sup>For in my inner being I delight in God's law, <sup>23</sup>but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.*

*<sup>24</sup>What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup>Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

That, of course is the Apostle Paul writing in Romans 7:15-25.

So, what's our response? What insights has John to encourage us?

The first one is to "Know." John wants us to know some things – important things. In fact, he uses this word "know" seven times in these eight verses. To know something is to use our mind, our head. To know something is to be certain about it and not to have any questions. It is to have something guaranteed. To these people, who like you and me flip from obedience to disobedience, comes seven phrases of assurance. Seven things of which we can be sure and certain.

- v. 13 - we may know that we have eternal life.
- v. 15 - we know that He hears us.
- v. 15 - we know that we have what we asked of him.
- v. 18 - we know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin.
- v. 19 - we know that we are children of God.
- v. 20 - we know that the Son of God has come.
- v. 20 - we may know him who is true.

These are seven realities, seven promises, seven for sure statements, seven givens that are ours through Christ Jesus. And please note that all of them are present or current realities. They all affect us now.

Our first response and our first action toward what we are up against is for us to know of these God given realities and we've got to believe them in our hearts. And the second response is for us to be confident. Confidence is a matter of the heart. Because we can know and be certain of these realities, we can be confident. This confidence that is ours as followers of Jesus is not based upon who we are, how clever we are or what we do, how much money we make, what kind of house or car we have or how others regard us. No! this confidence is based upon whose we are. As children of God, we can have supreme confidence because our heavenly Father is totally and utterly trustworthy.

So, as he ends his letter John wants us, like the believers to whom he wrote so long ago, to be strengthened and grow in confidence and resolve in the midst of a disheartening struggle. Like a good coach, he has outlined the strengths and tactics of the opposing team, but despite the fact that they often seem to win, he wants us to be confident Christians. He wants us to concentrate on rebuilding our team's weaknesses, watching out for each other and praying for each other (and especially for any who may be sinning and in danger falling away from their faith). He wants us to continue working together to build a church community that is self-sustaining and mutually encouraging.

I conclude with words written by Gary Burge in the NIV Application Commentary on First John. *"We need to be bold about those things we know with certainty, [which God has laid down for us in his Word]. We need to speak with conviction and assurance about God and his commitment to us. We need to say from lectern and pulpit – God desires us to be confident Christians! God desires for us to be bold! God desires to purge doubt from our souls so that we can live enjoying the assurance of one who is eternally loved. When our assurance is truly anchored and secure, nothing can shake it."* As you head off into another week - a week of living in the valley - take with you God's certainties and live in the confidence he has for you as you bring His real world into the world in which you live. Amen.

## PCI Let's Pray

### Monday 15 March

James & Heather Cochrane (global mission workers in Portugal)

Pray for James, Heather and all the members of Comunidade Pedra Vivas. Give thanks to God for online ministry opportunities – Sunday services, prayer meetings, team planning and micro groups. Pray it will soon be safe for them to meet in person again.

India

Pray for the work and witness of the Church of North India, in a country which has been badly affected by Covid-19. Pray for Christians to find and use opportunities to share their faith in their everyday lives.

### Tuesday 16 March

Rosemary Spiers (Deaconess, Greenwell Street, Newtownards)

Rosemary thinks of creative ways to keep in contact with others, phone call, a card, a craft pack, a book in the post, or using other forms of media. Pray that God would use these means in bringing his love, hope and encouragement to others.

Douglas Presbyterian Church

Pray for Rev David Reid, the kirk session and members of Douglas home mission congregation in Omagh Presbytery.

### Wednesday 17 March

Volker & JinHyeog Glissmann (global mission workers in Southern Africa)

Pray for Volker in his role as a programme developer for the Theological Education by Extension College in Johannesburg. Give thanks that participants on the 'Knowing God' training course normally held in Zomba, have been able to meet online.

Pakistan

Pray for the leaders and members of the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan. Pray too for staff and students at Gujranwala Theological Seminary and United Bible Training Centre, Pakistan.

### Thursday 18 March

Christine Wilson (community outreach worker, Lisnabreen, Bangor)

Pray for Lisnabreen church family as they seek to meet the many spiritual, physical, emotional and mental health needs of the local community. Pray for their new Doorstep Ministries, seeking to offer practical help and resources to those in greatest need.

Drogheda congregation

Pray that online services and ministries will encourage people in their faith and be a means of witness for the gospel. Pray for plans to celebrate Easter through church services and a holiday Bible club online.

### Friday 19 March

Social Witness

Pray for the work of Specialist Services as they endeavour to deliver services in these challenging times. Pray for those individuals in need of treatment for their addiction and those being released from prison. Give thanks for Thompson House, Carlisle House and Gray's Court and for the dedicated staff teams.

Education

Give thanks for school leaders, teachers, assistants, support staff and governors and for all their work in connecting with pupils over the past year and in making the school environment safe. Pray the return to in-classroom learning would be smooth, with enough energy, creativity and stamina to keeping going for another term.

### Saturday 20 March

General Council

Give thanks for the small team working in the Creative Production Department in Assembly Buildings led by James McCormick. Continue to pray for them as they work both in the office and from home engaged in the production of numerous resources for congregations including the Presbyterian Herald.