

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF FIRST JOHN PART SIX

John begins this final chapter by drawing together the flow of events which follow believing in Jesus as the Christ, the promised Son of God. First we are born again of God, and so are His children. Because we love our Father who loves us, we will love our Christian brothers who are the rest of the family. At the same time our love for our heavenly Father will show because we will want to live His way, according to His commandments, overcoming the world, the flesh and the Devil instead of being defeated by their influence. It all begins and continues by faith in Him, not by our own efforts.(5:1-5; Col.2:6)

Throughout the book John has been showing us about what, as children of God, we can expect to have confidence. Now he goes back a step to remind us of the lines of evidence on which our initial faith in Jesus was based, which then become the means for convincing someone else to start on a journey of faith. He talks about the witnesses of the Spirit, the water and the blood. Because he does not on this occasion explain what he means, the interpretation has become a matter of contention. Some people suggest, for example, that 'water' refers to water baptism, and that certainty of our salvation only follows baptism. The difficulty with that approach is that it is not supported by the rest of scripture and John says nothing in his letter about baptism. On the other hand in his gospel there is a very similar passage that provides strong clues.

In Jn.3:3-8 Jesus tells Nicodemus that he needs to be born again. When Nicodemus does not understand, supposing that rebirth would be natural birth repeated, Jesus explains that He is talking of natural birth from water the first time and spiritual birth from the Spirit the second time. Just as physical birth takes place surrounded by a bag of water or amniotic fluid so spiritual birth is surrounded by the loving care of the Holy Spirit. 'Water' in the context of birth therefore speaks of the beginning of physical life, and 'blood' of physical death. The gospel accounts of the birth and life of Jesus read with an open heart give compelling witness to the truth of His message. Similarly the story of His death and the promise that the blood He shed can cleanse our sin speaks plainly to the heart of anyone seeking forgiveness. The third witness is the Holy Spirit who constantly works to convince us of our need of Jesus,(Jn.16:8-11) and of the truth of His word.(Jn.14:26) Most of us know those who came to Christ simply because they read the gospels for themselves. The witness of man, whether a friend who spoke to us one to one, or an evangelist who was talking to many at the same time, is a good beginning but in the end new birth happens because God speaks to us for Himself,(5:9) and is confirmed when we know for certain that we now have His life, eternal life, inside us.(5:6-12)

The final certainty of which John speaks is regarding prayer. Anything we ask, He hears, and we already have an answer, with one important condition, that it is according to His will not our own. If the Spirit lives in us, not only may we talk to Him but equally importantly, He will be constantly speaking to us, letting us know His wisdom and His will regarding every situation we face.(Jas.1:5; Rom.8:26,27) Faith is not trying to convince God but letting Him convince us.(Matt.6:7,8) Listening first by faith to God is the essential condition of all promises about answered prayer.(5:13-15; Matt.7:7; 21:22; Jn.15:7)

John links two ideas together to give a very practical illustration of loving our brother on the one hand and answered prayer on the other. He talks of asking God for life for one who is committing sin not leading to death. This is another area in which there has been much speculation as to what may or may not be a mortal sin, one leading to death. The only Bible explanation is in Matt.12:31,32 where Jesus warns the Pharisees who are accusing Him of being an agent of Satan against 'the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit'. This alone will not be forgiven and therefore leads to death. He is speaking of the final rejection of the convicting work of the Holy Spirit which leads to God having to give up on us. This is the only alternative to the final choice of repentance and faith which leads to salvation and eternal life. Everyone before the end of his life will do one or the other. John therefore is describing the sin of a fellow Christian who needs to be restored to faith so that his Christian life can resume being fruitful.

So often the sin of our Christian brothers and sisters only makes us irritated and critical. We judge people and write them off feeling superior that we have not done the same. Loving our brother is not just meeting his physical needs when he falls on hard times but also involves responding to his spiritual needs in prayer. As we listen to God about our brother He will give us compassion and understanding and the wisdom to know how to help. What can we say by way of encouragement and exhortation, or do in Christ-like example which will help to restore him? This one practical application of loving our brother could make an immense difference in an area of pastoral concern where the church often fails so badly.(5:16,17)

The spiritual survival of any of us in a hostile world controlled, not in the present age by God, but by Satan, is tough. It is only the miraculous result of what God has given us in a new nature when we were born again, and a new strength as He lives within to keep us. We urgently need to know the resources from God of which we can be certain and to communicate them to each other. Our confidence in Christ needs to be shared constantly. This is the love of God in action.(5:18-20)

At first sight, John's closing words urging us as little children to keep ourselves from idols seem strangely out of place. Nothing in the Bible is ever out of place. John is identifying the one simple reason any of us, as God's children, sin, when an idol, something or someone takes Jesus Christ's place, for the moment, in our hearts.(5:21; Jn.16:9; Rom.14:23) This will rob us of the certainty which God has promised us about every aspect of our relationship with Jesus Christ. Refuse to be robbed!