

Limited Resources, Limitless God

Session 6

January 11, 2026

When Your Confidence Falls Short

The Point: We can stand victoriously because of Christ.

Session Passage: 1 John 3:21–4:6

1 John 3:21-24

Connection to the Point: We stand confidently as we remain in Christ and obey Him.

The Setting. Sometime after writing his Gospel, John wrote to the community of house churches in Ephesus to address difficulties that had arisen. Some of these members had embraced certain new beliefs about the person and work of Christ contrary to the bedrock of the gospel. These heretical beliefs involved denying that Jesus, the Son of God, came in the flesh and that His death was necessary for the forgiveness of sins. Although these dissenters left the church, they organized a group of itinerant teachers who circulated about the churches to propagate their beliefs. This theological assault created confusion and caused many to question whether they really knew God, whether they had experienced eternal life, and whether they really knew the truth. John wrote in the form of a poetic sermon in which he underscored the key ideas of Jesus which he recorded in John 13–17. He wrote to combat the propaganda of the false teachers and fortify the assurance of salvation believers possess in Christ.

Dear friends, if our hearts don't condemn us, we have confidence before God (v. 21). John addressed his readers as “dear friends” (literally “beloved ones”), something he constantly repeated throughout this epistle (2:7; 3:2,21; 4:1,7,11). He did so to show concern and compassion for people who struggled with hurting hearts because of their condemning consciences. John wanted to reassure his readers even though their confidence wavered because of their self-inflicted condemnation. Believers who remain guilt-ridden and unsure of their standing before God (3:19-20) will have little or no confidence to go before God. John's audience would have understood the word translated as confidence as the most valued right of a citizen of a free state, the right to speak one's mind unhampered by fear or shame. Therefore, as a result of having an untroubled conscience, a believer could have an intimate, relational, one-on-one encounter with God.

And receive whatever we ask from him (v. 22). Having the blessing of untroubled consciences, John added that not only would they have confidence before God but that they also would enjoy the guarantee of answered prayer. Obviously, John spoke hyperbolically since he did not mean to give the idea that God gave them “a blank check” so that even sinful requests would be answered. He intended for his readers to understand that their walking in complete fellowship with God would lead to asking in complete surrender to His will.

Because we keep his commands and do what is pleasing in his sight (v. 22). John gave two reasons why believers can expect that God will hear their prayers—they keep His commands and they regularly practice what pleases Him. Keeping God's commands includes His explicit demands. Doing what pleases God comes from a heart that loves Him. Their love and obedience comes from their fellowship with God.

Now this is his command: that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ (v. 23). John summarized all the commands with a single command consisting of faith in Jesus Christ and active love for one another. Although he used “believe” almost ninety times in his Gospel, this marked the first time that John used the word “believe” explicitly in this epistle. Earlier he inferred the need to acknowledge Jesus Christ and the danger of denying Him (2:22-23). The verb tense indicates “a once for all” act of placing one's faith in Christ, and the phrase formed a miniature confession of faith. Believing in the name of Jesus Christ equalled making one's total commitment to Him and obeying His commands. John has referred to Jesus as God's Son (1:3) and as the believers' righteous advocate in God's presence (2:1). Later he identified Him as the One who had come from God (4:2; 5:6,20). For John, the “name” included everything he taught about Christ so that he only needed to use this shorthand description of the fundamental essence of the Christian faith.

And love one another as he commanded us (v. 23). Only by believing on the name of the Jesus Christ can a person ever have a clean heart before God. This would enable a person to fulfill the second aspect of the dual command. John used the present tense which would have reminded his readers that they should practice Christian love as a daily, continual expression. The reciprocal pronoun “one another” urged the mutual display of love among the members of the family of God. John made it clear that Jesus had called His followers to love another (John 13:34; 15:12,17).

The one who keeps his commands remains in him and he in him (v. 24). Those who believe in Jesus Christ and love one another as He commanded them live in God and God lives in them. John likely used the plural “commands” to emphasize that the one command to believe and love expresses all of the subordinate commands implied by a total surrender to follow Christ. Previously he wrote that the person who abides in Christ ought to walk as He did (2:6).

And the way we know that he remains in us (v. 24). John used the verb “we know” to refer to knowledge gained by drawing a conclusion based on facts and not feelings. He drew upon Jesus’s teaching in the upper room (John 17:21) before they left for Gethsemane to pray.

Is from the Spirit he has given us (v. 24). With this passage, John introduced the first of several references to the Holy Spirit in 1 John (4:2,6,13; 5:6,8). Here he connected the believers’ assurance of salvation with their experience of the Spirit. When someone possesses the Spirit of God, that individual has divine evidence of the reciprocal relationship (Rom. 8:14-16). The past tense translated as “has given us” looks back to the moment of salvation when the Spirit came to make His home in the believer.

1 John 4:1-3

Connection to the Point: Not everyone who claims to speak for God walks in the truth of Christ.

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit (v. 1). The mention of the Spirit in the previous verse led John to issue a stern warning against naively believing everyone who claimed to speak under spiritual inspiration. Once again John signaled his transition to a new section with the intimate form of address, “dear friends,” a device he used repeatedly in this epistle (2:7; 3:2,21).

But test the spirits to see if they are from God (v. 1). The imperative “test” means to examine or to prove carefully like coins tested for genuineness and proper weight. By using the present tense, John meant this testing should be done on a continual basis. Both plural imperatives, “do not believe” and “test” point to a church-wide community responsibility. He warned his readers not to accept every spirit as true. He knew the temptation existed to ascribe any unusual phenomenon to the power of God. Tongues and prophecy would have certainly drawn people to accept the people practicing them as being inspired by the Spirit of God. Paul also had to warn believers to test the spirits (1 Cor. 12:1-3; 14:29-30; 1 Thess. 5:20-21). John used the plural “spirits” because he saw that the spirit of truth or error can operate in a number of people at any one time. He called them to practice discernment and to evaluate carefully both the messages and messengers to determine if they were from God.

Because many false prophets have gone out into the world (v. 1). John explained why the believers needed to test the spirits—many false prophets circulated around them. No doubt some of these heretical teachers had defected from John’s congregation and now spearheaded a secession from the community (2:18-19). Previously they appeared to be genuine (Matt. 7:15), but by their false teaching they had led people away from the truth. These mouthpieces for spiritual error had withdrawn from the true believing community and sought to lead others down the road to theological heresy and destruction.

This is how you know that Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God (v. 2). Now John specified how to recognize when a prophet is inspired by the Spirit of God by bringing it to its simplest terms. “Every spirit” referred to the spirit of the person speaking. John ensured that they understood the crucial nature of the confession—that Jesus has come in the flesh. By use of the past participle, John underscored the continuing effect of His coming. With this, John continued to argue against the false teaching that had infiltrated the church.

But every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God (v. 3). Having stated the positive confession of Jesus in the previous verse, now John followed with the negative counterpart. Those false teachers or false prophets who claimed to speak by the Spirit's inspiration but refused to acknowledge Jesus could not be trusted. They did not come from God, and whatever they taught could not be trusted.

This is the spirit of the antichrist (v. 3). John referred to the denial of the true identity of Jesus with the activity of the antichrist, a term that only John used in the New Testament (1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 7). Previously, he had pointed out the heretical tendencies present in the house church community in Ephesus (see 1 John 2:18-21) where he described the antichrists. He regarded these false teachers as antichrists and saw their erroneous beliefs as both dangerous for the life and unity of the church and a signal of the arrival of the end-time. One aspect of their Christological error was emphasizing the deity of Jesus at the expense of His humanity (2 John 7), which undermined the gospel message.

Which you have heard is coming (v. 3). The false teachers or antichrists (2:18) had already gone out into the world. The presence of the antichrist signaled the last days and the final rebellion against Jesus Christ. John understood and wanted his readers to know that the denial of Jesus Christ did not merely represent intellectual error. He declared it represented the rebellion against God which would end in the eternal demise of many.

Even now it is already in the world (v. 3). John's word choice in Greek made this final statement emphatic—even now that antichrist is at work in the world. The heretical tendencies in the church in Ephesus pointed to the imminence of the end-time. However, John would offer hope toward the end of this epistle (5:4-5).

1 John 4:4-6

Connection to the Point: We stand confidently because of the One we stand in is victorious.

You are from God, little children (v. 4). John addressed his readers as "children" seven times in this letter (2:1,12,28; 3:7,18; 4:4; 5:21), and each time he stressed what he wanted them to embrace. In the face of the seemingly overwhelming threat of the antichrist, John emphasized the contrast between the true followers of Jesus and the heretical teachers and their cronies. He opened with "you" to underscore that their confession that Jesus had come in the flesh demonstrated that they were from God and meant that they are the children of God (3:10). This gave the meaning, "You, yourselves, and no one else, are from God."

You have conquered them (v. 4). The pronoun "them" referred to the false prophets who had incorrect and deceptive beliefs about Jesus. The true followers of Jesus had defeated these heretical teachers and those who agreed with them.

Because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world (v. 4). The believers had the power from true spiritual inspiration to overcome the aberrant teachings of these worldly propagandists. They had the Spirit of God living in them! This did not necessarily mean that they had physically removed them out of the church but that they had tested them (v. 1) and refused to accept their false doctrines.

They are from the world (v. 5). John drew a contrast between those of the world, a system under Satan's control (John 12:31; 2 Cor. 4:4; 1 John 5:19), and those who come from God (v. 6). The evil one in the world inspired those who belong to the world. The false teachers had rejected the true message and for all intents and purposes had thrown their lot in with the world. They and their followers abandoned the community of the true faith and went out with the rest of the people who now opposed the gospel.

Therefore what they say is from the world (v. 5). The false teachers' language reflected the world's point of view. By rejecting the message of the gospel, they spoke continually (present tense in Greek) from the world and refused to acknowledge Jesus Christ. In other words, they drew the substance of their teaching from the godless world.

And the world listens to them (v. 5). The false teachers had some success in spreading their ideas about Jesus. Obviously, worldly people eagerly embraced their heretical message because they liked the way it sounded. They had rejected the

sound teaching of the gospel in order to teach in a way that those in the world might find acceptable. This even applied to those who once claimed to believe in and follow Christ.

We are from God (v. 6). Now John offered a contrasting picture. The first person plural pronoun included more than the apostles. More likely John included himself and his readers, because the Spirit leads all true members of the body of Christ to proclaim the gospel correctly. In sharp contrast with the heretical teachers, John emphatically declared his and his readers' alignment with God.

Anyone who knows God listens to us (v. 6). Those who truly know God through confessing Jesus as Christ and Savior (1 John 4:15) will listen to those who speak His truth and will not pay attention to heresy. The present tense verbs suggested a relationship with God that continuously grows.

Anyone who is not from God does not listen to us (v. 6). John advised his readers that they should not be surprised when the heretical teachers and their followers persistently reject the gospel. By stating this opposite truth, he implicitly included an appeal to resist what the false teachers offered. After all, they belonged to the spirit of the antichrist and spoke his language.

This is how we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception (v. 6). John's readers could test the Spirits of truth and the spirit of deception by examining the teachers' confessions and through observing the character of their followers.

Sources

- Akin, Daniel L. *Exalting Jesus in 1, 2, & 3 John*, Christ-Centered Exposition (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishing Group, 2014).
- Akin, Daniel L. *1, 2, 3 John*, The New American Commentary, vol. 38 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001).
- Barry, John D., ed. "Antichrist," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).
- Barton, Bruce B; Comfort, Philip W.; Veerman, Dave; Woods, Len; and Taylor, Linda K. *1, 2, & 3 John*, Life Application Bible Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Tyndall House Publishers, Inc., 1998).
- Butler, Trent C., gen. ed. "Antichrist," in *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991).
- Kostenberger, Andreas J., and Yarbrough, Robert W. *1–3 John*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2024).
- Kruse, Colin G. *The Letters of John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000).
- Marshall, I. Howard. *The Epistles of John*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978).
- Jackman, David. *The Message of John's Letters*, The Bible Speaks Today Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).
- Orr, James. "Antichrist," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Chicago, IL: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915).
- Pfeiffer, Charles F.; Vos, Howard F.; and Rea, John., eds. "Antichrist," in *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975).
- Phillips, John. *Exploring the Epistles of John*, The John Phillips Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2003).
- Smalley, Stephen S. *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 51 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984).
- Yarbrough, Robert W. *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).