

Psalm 1:1-3 Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful! Their delight is in the law of the LORD, and they meditate on his law day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper. (73)

Introduction

A couple of weekends ago, Daniel and I went to a store looking for a lamp for a bedside table. The table isn't big, so the lamp needed to be a specific size. Sadly, when we got to the store (a secondhand store) the options for table lamps were sparse. About to lose hope, something changed. Suddenly, I said, "What if we look for a floor lamp instead?" Remembering that I had a lamp on my desk I was eager to get rid of and that was the perfect size, I switched my perspective and there were (now) many options available. We found a floor lamp that works marvelously, and the table lamp has a new home.

So, when I looked at the texts for this Sunday, I cringed and sighed. The passage from Acts made me furrow my brow and shrug. Scanning the Psalm, *meh*. The 1 John 5 passage made me cringe and shudder, *gosh I dislike the assumption that Christians are better than others*. The gospel was ... to say the least... a lot and too much. So, there I was...speechless...: *I wonder if I anyone would notice if there wasn't a sermon?*

But then: floor lamps. *Oh damn*. I went back to the text that gave me the strongest visceral reaction and looked at it again, but this time from a different perspective—bottom up rather than top down. 1 John 5:13 was like a neon sign at night with no other light around: *I wrote these things for you all—those who believe in the name of the son of God—so that you may know that you have eternal life.*¹ Boom. This isn't a text about judging non-Christians or people of other traditions as inferior, hell-bound, bad, and life-less. Rather, it's a means to tell a small group of Christians under attack to hold-on: *hold the faith, little flock, God's with you*. And here, the author, like many others before, whispers courage and compassion to those struggling to make sense of things, who are fighting against doubt, who want to call it quits and walk away, *wasn't our life before easier?* And rather than offer some trite colloquialism, what does our author do? Points up: *this is of God and not of your doing; keep following The Way of Christ. You are not alone, the Spirit of God is with you in your fear, in your doubt, in your anxiety.*²

¹ Translation mine unless otherwise noted.

² I. Howard Marshall *The Epistles of John* TNICNT Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1978. 3-4, "...he here summarizes his purpose in the composition of this Epistle. He was writing to a church in which there had arisen divergent teaching regarding the nature of Christian belief...John now sums up by saying that the effect of what he has written should be to give assurance to believers that they do possess eternal life. John was therefore writing not to persuade unbelievers of the truth to the Christian faith but rather to strengthen Christian believers who might be tempted to doubt the reality of their Christian experience and to give up their faith in Jesus."

1 John 5:9-13

If we are receiving the witness of humanity, the witness of God is greater; because this is the witness of God that God has witnessed concerning [God's] son. The one who believes in the son of God has the witness in themselves; the one who does not believe has made God a liar because [they] have not believed in the witness which God has witnessed concerning [God's] son. And this is the testimony: God gave to us eternal life, and this life is in the son of [God]. The one who has the son has life; the one who does not have the son of God does not have life. (1 Jn 5:9-12)

The author here is exceptionally (and painfully?) logical and mathematical. If we receive human testimony, why wouldn't we accept the testimony of God who is greater? If we trust what our neighbor says who is capable of being inconsistent in retelling and lacking love, can't we also trust God who is the substance of consistency and love?³ And to what has God witnessed? God's son: Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ died and raised.⁴ This is the thrust of all four gospel narratives, the core of Paul's theology that he was willing to die for, and through which the rest of the second testament weaves and wends. For John, this is not the stuff of humans but of God⁵—we couldn't make this up and, if you really think about it, I doubt we'd want to.

The author continues, the one who believes has the witness from God of Jesus the Christ in themselves and the one who does not believe calls God a liar. Again, this is logical and mathematical: to believe in a witness is to affirm that the one who shares it is truthful; not to believe the witness is to say that that one who shares it is lying. If I say I have seen unicorns, many of you may not believe it and thus would esteem the claim a lie and me with it as a liar. To believe in the testimony of God is to affirm with the Spirit that Jesus is the Christ and to call it truth; not to believe is to categorize it as a lie. I want to point out that there's no condemnation here, just a plain statement that those who do not believe do not have the eternal life that is found in and given by faith in Christ. They live, but not in the same way as those who claim Christ crucified and raised.

I also want to point out that for those who join in the claim of the centurion at the foot of the cross watching Jesus breath his last ("*Truly this was the son of God!*"⁶), faith affirms in us this man Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, is God. For those of us who believe the testimony of the women fleeing the tomb, faith affirms in us who Jesus is thus who God is for us. There isn't the claim that there can't be other ways to live, but that this is the way for those who have been so encountered. Thus, our affirmation is neither mere intellectual choice nor confession made by

³ Keeping the consistency with the larger context of Chapter 5 and 4.

⁴ Marshall *The Epistles of John* 17 "The witness of the Spirit is God's testimony to Jesus."

⁵ Marshall *Epistles of John* 17, "...John is saying that we ought to accept God's testimony precisely because it is God's testimony and that this testimony concerns his Son, the supreme importance of the fact that Jesus is the Son of God is thus brought out. Because it is God who has borne testimony to Jesus and declared him to be his Son, it follows that acceptance of Jesus as the Son of God is of fundamental and decisive importance."

⁶ Mt 27:54; Mk 15:39; Lk 23:47

threat of death and hell; it's the assertion of faith which is of God and in God.⁷ We believe not because it's been proven to us or is material fact, but because we've been encountered by this God in the event of faith and that encounter affirms the testimony of this God about this Jesus by the power of this Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

In this affirmation of the testimony of God is life. For John, it's eternal life and it's for those who believe in the name of the Son of God. Those who do not believe do not have life. This is tricky language and coarse to our ears in 2021. So, what is our author getting at?

First, this is not a recipe for the violence of threatening human beings in the name of evangelism. We are not to create systems by which we force people to choose life or literal death to confess Jesus is the Christ. You either do or you don't; in the end God is love and loves all: those who do and those who do not believe. (This is the offense of the Gospel!). Jesus descended to the dead to release the captives and close those doors, not leaving them open for those who don't believe. The most this text gives us is those who don't believe don't have the life that is promised in Christ to those who believe. This letter was written to Christians to encourage them; it isn't a treatise on mission and evangelization.

Second, and importantly for us, the life we have in Christ by faith is life that is lived like Christ by faith. Faith asserts that the man Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, thus by faith we're linked to and grafted into the history of this Jesus the Christ—in and into his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.⁸ What was and is Jesus's, is now ours—yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The church has existed, continues to exist, and will continue to exist not because of dry human rituals and violent force, but because this testimony of God keeps going forward calling people into it (culturally and contextually shifting, bending, and moving). It's not our doing but God's. Thus, in being grafted into the life of Jesus, we are ushered in as part of the manifold followers of *The Way of Christ*.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann *The Johannine Epistles a Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1973). "This testimony can no more be exhibited as something at hand than can the testimony of the spirit. Ζωὴ αἰώνιος ('eternal life') belongs to the eschatological time of salvation, but is already present for faith; for God has given it to us as a gift, and according to 3:14 we know 'that we have passed out of death into life.' It can thus only be testimony in the sense that this knowledge is inherent in faith." 19

⁸ Bultmann *The Johannine Epistles* 19-20, "The basis of this knowledge is given by: καὶ αὕτη ἡ ζωὴ ἐν τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ ἐστὶν ('and this life is in his Son'). That the 'life' can be the 'testimony' lies in the fact that life is there in the Son of God for the believer, indeed in the historical Jesus, in whom the life was made manifest, according to 1:1-3. On the basis of v 6, it is specifically to this historical Jesus that the spirit bears witness: the testimony given by the spirit and the testimony of God to the life bestowed upon us as a gift are one and the same, because life is given in the Son. One would not be surprised were the text to read: ἡ ζωὴ ὁ υἱός ἐστιν ('The life is the Son'). But, certain as it is that the revelation of the life is given in the historical Jesus, the author does not risk the direct equation of 'life' and 'Son' (as is done in Jn 11:25; 14:6), but chooses to say that 'life' is given 'in the Son,' a formulation that appears also in Jn 3:15 (similarly Jn 16:33; 20:31)."

And this is the way of life for the Christian, the one who believes the testimony of God: we live in love, in asking and granting forgiveness, in baptism, in truth, in reality, in possibility, and in solidarity with God and with our fellow human beings. In this way, we live eternally now and, one day, forever. For us Christians, the way of Christ leads through death into new life and is the way of freedom and liberation, release and the end of captivity—not only for us but for others. Having been given the way of Christ as our framework, we are made aware of what systems of death look like and what systems of life look like; we are made to be free in the world to bring life to those stuck in death not by forcing personal conversion at the tip of a sword (metal or verbal). Rather, we do so by exposing human made systems threatening death for those who don't measure up to the dominant culture; and then we convert those systems by bringing them through death and into new life to participate in the cosmic and divine work of love and freedom.

Be encouraged, beloved, hold steady; God is with you.