

2. Know

Another four-letter word that is very prevalent in the Scriptures is “know.” It is found more than 425 times in the New Testament, being particularly prominent in the Pauline epistles and in the Johannine writings. It occurs more times in John’s Gospel than in all three of the Synoptics.

The two main words translated “know” are *ginosko* and *oida* and their derivatives. There is some distinction between the words although at times they seem to be used interchangeably. In general, *ginosko* refers specifically to a knowledge grounded in personal experience. *Oida*, on the other hand, means basically “to have seen with the mind’s eye,” referring primarily to mental perception. The former, with rare exceptions, is translated “know”—approximately 200 of the 220 times used in the New Testament. In contrast, the latter (*oida*) is translated “see” more than half the time. This is not true, however, of its use by Paul and John. When used by them it usually carried the idea of “know.” *Ginosko* and its derivatives are favorites of both Paul and John. One scholar has said that the verb *ginoskein* “plays a bigger part in John and 1 John than in all the rest of early Christian literature” (TDNT).

It is possible that the prevalence of *ginosko* in the Pauline epistles and particularly in the Johannine writings was due, at least to some degree, to their acquaintance with and the challenge of the Gnostics.

We shall not call attention to each use of the word translated “know.” In most cases, with the exception of

references from the fifth chapter of 1 John, the word is *ginosko*. There are two other places where *oida* is used in the references that will be cited specifically from 1 John. They are 3:4: “You *know* that he appeared to take away sins,” and 3:14: “We *know* that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren.”¹

We shall concentrate on 1 John for the remainder of this study of the word “know.” This will be done for two reasons. First, the prevalence of “know” in the Scriptures necessitates some selection. Second, “know” is more central in 1 John than in any other book of the Bible.

The selection of I John means that we shall miss some of the great “know” verses and statements found elsewhere. Among these are the reassuring words of the “Good Shepherd”: “I know my own and my own know me” (John 10:14). Then there are the words of Jesus to His disciples: “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Also, there is that great promise that has meant so much to so many through the years: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). Of many other references that could be given, let me cite only one. It is from what is generally assumed to be the last of Paul’s epistles, possibly written a short time before his death. To Timothy he wrote, “I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me” (2 Timothy 1:12). Now, let us turn to 1 John.

Purpose: “That You May Know”

As John came toward the close of the epistle, he evidently wanted to be sure that those to whom he was writing understood his purpose. He pointedly said, “I write this to

¹ Italics added for emphasis.

you . . . that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). In a similar way he clearly stated the purpose for the writing of his Gospel: “These are written that you may believe . . . and that believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). The purpose for the Gospel was that they “may have life”; the purpose of the epistle was that they may know that they have life. In other words, the Gospel was written to produce faith; the epistle was written to set forth the evidences or proofs that one had that faith. The life that we have through faith is a gift of God. It resides in and comes from the Son: “He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life” (1 John 5:12; see John 17:3).

John wrote his epistle to those who had the Son, to those who believed “in the name of the Son of God” (1 John 5:13). In other words, he assumed that they had faith. “To you” in the verse clearly refers to Christians. But what does he mean when he says, “I have written this” (WMS) to you? To what does “this” or “these things” (KJV) refer? Evidently the reference is specifically to verses 1-12 of chapter 5. It seems, however, that at least in a general and indirect way it refers to the entire epistle. Possibly John paused and thought back through what he had written and then added (KJV): “These things have I written . . .” At least John had given several evidences in the preceding chapter that one can examine and know that he has eternal life.

And, incidentally, for the writers of the New Testament and particularly for John, “eternal life” is a present possession. It refers to quality as well as to quantity of life. Two modern translations catch this emphasis in a fine way: “So you may know that you already have eternal life” (WMS) or that “here and now you possess eternal life” (Phil). Even if “eternal” refers to life after death, it is a present possession and not merely a future hope. A rather interesting sidelight is the fact that in 5:13 the word “eternal” follows the word for “life” and the verb. This order could

have been to emphasize or underscore the word eternal. Westcott translated it “that ye have life—yes, eternal life.”²

To restate: John’s purpose in writing the epistle was that those to whom he wrote might be “quite sure” (Phil), might get to know with “full and present assurance” (EGT), or might know with a knowledge final and certain that they had eternal life (Westcott).³

Evidence: Relation to Sin

John gives several evidences or proofs by which one can know whether he has eternal life. One is his attitude toward and his relation to sin. Sin is a recurring theme throughout the epistle. John says, “If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves” (1 John 1:8) and “make him (Christ) a liar” (1:10). On the other hand, “the blood of Jesus Christ . . . cleanses us from all sin” (1:7). When we sin as children of God, “we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (2:1-2; see 4:10).

John further says that we, as Christians, “know that he appeared to take away sins; and in him there is no sin” (3:5). The author concludes that “no one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him” (3:6). Does this mean that the Christian never sins? Clearly the answer is *No* (see 1:8). The verb tense helps to solve the problem for us. It can carry the idea of continuous action. Williams translates 1 John 3:6 as follow: “No one who continues to live in union with Him practices sin” (WMS). Similarly, Robertson says that one who keeps on abiding

² Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1883), 180.
<https://archive.org/details/epistlesofstjohn0000west/page/208/mode/2up>. Accessed 12/27/2023.

³ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, 180.

“does not keep on sinning” (WP). Sin will not be a “prevailing habit” of his life (Westcott).⁴

John reiterates as follows: “Whoever practices sin belongs to the devil. . . . No one who is born of God makes a practice of sinning . . . he cannot practice sinning because he is born of God” (3:8-9, WMS). Again, John says, “We know that no one who is born of God makes a practice of sinning, but the Son who was born of God continues to keep him, and the evil one cannot touch him” (5:18, WMS). The security of the child of God does not depend upon him. It depends on “the Son who was born of God” (WMS), with whom the Christian has been brought into union. It was Jesus, in the great shepherd passage, who said, “I give them eternal life . . . and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:28-29).. What security! “Our security is not in our grip on Christ but His grip on us” (EGT).

Let us not forget John’s purpose in writing the epistle: “That you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). And permit me to say again that one way we can know is our relation to sin. If sin is the habit of our lives, then we have no assurance that we have eternal life. On the other hand, if the movement of our lives is away from sin, with an increasing victory over it, that is one proof or evidence that the Eternal Person who gives eternal life is dwelling within us.

Evidence: Obedience

Obedience to the commandments of God is another evidence or proof that one has eternal life as a present possession. This emphasis is evident in several places in the epistle. One of the strongest statements is found in the second chapter: “And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his

⁴ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, 101.

commandments” (1 John 2:3), or (NEB) “Here is the test by which we can make sure that we know him: do we keep his commands?” By our obedience to His commandments, we can come to know that we know Him. It makes little if any difference whether “Him” refers to God the Father or to the Son. After all, Jesus Himself said that He and the Father were one (John 10:30) and that he who had seen Him had seen the Father (John 14:9). God’s commandments were and are His commandments.

The main thrust of 1 John 2:3 and the ones that follow is that we can increasingly be sure that we know God if “we keep on keeping” His commandments (WP). In verse 4 plain-spoken John reverses his previous statement. He says, “He who says ‘I know him’ but disobeys his commandments is a liar.”

It has been of interest to me for some time that some of the New Testament writers had favorite words. This was possibly more true of John than of any other writer (life, light, love, abide, send). The word “commandments” is another relatively distinctive Johannine word. It is found more frequently in 1 John than in any other book of the New Testament. It appears as many times in the epistle as in all of Paul’s epistles. In most places John is clearly referring to the commandments of Christ.

It may be challenging if not disturbing, but we should not forget that we may know a great deal about Christ and yet not really know Him. “We get to know Him and know that we know Him by practice of His precepts” (EGT). In recent years 1 John 2:6 has challenged me as no other one verse of scripture: “He who says [“claims,” NEB] he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.” This verse will be touched on, to some degree, in other chapters. Walking in the way He walked or living as He lived is obedience on the highest level. It is not merely obedience of the commandments of the Master; it is conformity to the

kind or quality of life He lived. The proof of knowledge is obedience. The proof of union with Christ is likeness to Him. Here is something that will challenge us to the end of life's journey.

There is at least one other major reference in 1 John to the commandments of God (see 5:2-3). There the author clearly relates obedience of the commandments to love for God and one's fellow man and to the knowledge of God. "By this we know ["can be sure," WMS] that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments" (5:2). He then adds, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments" (5:3). There is no such thing as true or real love for or knowledge of God without obedience to His commandments.

Then John makes the striking and encouraging statement that God's "commandments are not burdensome." His standards or requirements are high and demanding, but they are not too difficult and demanding for us. There are three reasons this is true. (1) He gives us strength to bear whatever burdens His commandments may create. (2) His love for us and our love for Him and our fellowman lighten the load. There is created within us a desire to be obedient to whatever He commands. (3) The burden of obedience is lightened by the realization that His commandments are in harmony with our nature and needs. They are best for us. In other words, obedience is good common sense. Not only was the sabbath made for man (Mark 2:27); but also the same is true of every basic command or requirement of God. The One who created us is the source of the commandments. He knows what is best for us.

There is a verse in Hebrews that I like to relate to this one from 1 John. It is said of Moses that he chose rather to share "ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin" (Hebrews 11:25). Sin may bring

some pleasure, but such pleasure is “for a season” (KJV)—fleeting or passing.

Evidence: Love

In the first part of verse 5 of 1 John 2, John says, “Whoever keeps [“obeys,” NIV] his word, in him truly love for God is perfected.” Whether the reference is to our love for God or to the love that emanates from Him makes little difference. Whichever it is, love for God and our fellowman, which are His supreme and all-inclusive commandments (Matthew 22:34-40), is another evidence or proof that we have within us the Eternal Person who gives eternal life.

After all, “God is love” (1 John 4:18, 16). If the Eternal Person is on the inside, love is on the inside. Let us look at a few places in 1 John where the knowledge of the One who brings eternal life and love are closely related. There is that familiar passage: “We know that we have passed out of [“crossed over from,” NEB] death into life, because we love the brethren” (3:14). The “we,” which includes John the writer and his readers, is emphatic. This knowledge is not a future expectation but a present reality. We know while still on the earth that we have passed over or migrated from death to life.

We know “because we love the brethren.” “Because” suggests that the love of the brethren is the sign of and not the ground for our passing from death to life. That is, “we know . . . because,” not *we have passed from death to life because*. He who does not love “abides in death.” Let us repeat: Life is a product of our union with the Eternal Person. That Eternal Person, as previously suggested, is love (4:8, 16). Love is so inevitable for one who has been brought into union with love that the absence of love is proof that we still remain in death. Love and life belong together. You cannot have one without the other. The “life” John refers to here is eternal life: “You know that no murderer has eternal life

abiding in him” (3:15). And again he underscores that eternal life is a present possession—“has.”

Real love, the kind of love that is evidence that we have eternal life, proves itself by what it does. We know love (*agape*) or what love is by the fact that Christ laid down his life for us (3:16). The Christian’s love for his fellowman should be patterned after the self-sacrificing love of Christ. “He laid down his life . . . we ought to lay down our lives”—the “we” is emphatic. Few if any of us will ever need to lay down our lives. But there are very practical ways that love can be expressed. It is the very nature of love to share with others and particularly with those in need (3:17). This sharing should be true whether one is “rich” (TEV) or simply “has enough to live on” (NEB). “Sees his brother in need” is not a mere passing glance. He looks at him long enough to understand his need. If such a one locks or “closes his heart against him,” John asks the pointed question: “How does God’s love abide in him?”

We would expect it to say, “How does the love of his neighbor abide or dwell in him?” No, John asks, “How does God’s love [“love of God,” NASB] abide in him?” Does he refer to love for God or “the divine love” (NEB)—the love that comes from God? Possibly the primary reference is to the former, but it could be either or both. God is the object of our love. But He is also the source of any love that partakes of the *agape* quality. Furthermore, He provides the pattern for our love.

John’s closing admonition in this particular section is that we should “not love in word or speech but in deed [“actions,” NIV] and in truth” (3:18)—“it must be genuine and show itself in action” (NEB). He is not condemning kind words. He is saying that love should be expressed in more than kind thoughts or words. Love becomes real or is expressive of God’s love when it reaches out to meet the needs of others.

The relation of love and a knowledge of God is a continuing theme in 1 John. For example, he admonished his readers (4:7), “Let us love one another” and gave as the reason, “For [“because,” NEB] love is of God” or “originates with,” WMS] God.” He also says, “He who loves is born of God and knows God” (4:7). Love is not the cause of the new birth or the source of the knowledge of God. Rather, love is the effect or the result of the new birth. To reemphasize, however, the effect is so inevitable that “persistence in loving . . . is proof that one has been begotten of God” (WP). Or, as Kittel says, “The practice of love is the criterion of the knowledge of God” (TDNT).

Since “God is love” (4:8, 16), one “who does not love does not know God.” Also, since God loved us enough to “send his Son to be the expiation [“atoning sacrifice,” NIV] for our sins” (4:10), we “ought to love one another” (4:11). In other words, here is the proof that we have eternal life. For John the abiding is a two-way street: “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (4:16). John then gives the reassuring words, “There is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear” (4:18)—fear of life or of death.

Evidence: The Presence of the Spirit

John specifically mentions one other evidence or proof that we have eternal life as a present possession. There are two specific references to this proof or evidence. The first is as follows: “And by this we know that he abides in us [“remains in union with us,” WMS], by the Spirit which he has given us” (1 John 3:24). The word “abides” [“lives in” (NIV), “dwells within” (NEB)] is one of John’s favorite words, to which a chapter in this book is devoted. Here the mutual abiding expresses a union of the strongest and closest kind.

The source given here by John for the knowledge or assurance that we abide in Him and He in us is by or from

“the Spirit which He has given us” (3:24). When was the Spirit given? For John personally the reference was doubtless to Pentecost. For his readers the gift of the Spirit was when they believed or possibly sometime subsequent to their initial Christian experience. We know that the latter was true for some New Testament Christians (see Acts 8:14-17; 19:1-7). But regardless of when the Spirit came, His presence within and the assurance His presence brings is the privilege of every child of God.

What does John mean when he says, “We know . . . by the Spirit which he has given us” (1 John 3:24)? He had just said, “All who keep his commandments abide in him and he in them” (3:24). Earlier he had said, “And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments” (2:3). He had also related freedom from sin to abiding in Christ (3:6). Over and over again he emphasized the close relation of love for God and man to the assurance of a vital relation to the Eternal Person which brings eternal life.

Is the presence of the Spirit another evidence or proof that we have eternal life? Possibly so. But it is also possible that the Spirit is operative in and is the source of the other evidences or proofs. How can we have the victory over sin? How can we keep the commandments of God? What is the source of the *agape* type of love? Is it not the Spirit whom He has given us? In other words, the Divine Spirit is the ultimate source of the Christian’s knowledge of God and of the assurance that he has eternal life.

This emphasis on the Spirit is underscored in the statement: “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given of his own Spirit” (4:13). “By this” [“hereby,” KJV] looks forward. “Not only does mutual love prove that God abides in us (see succeeding verses), but the experiences of his own Spirit adds a concrete collaboration” (IB). And we should not forget that the gift is permanent, and

the effects of the gift are permanent. We have the Spirit; the Spirit gives life.

Conclusion

We have suggested that 1 John contains at least four specific proofs or evidences that will enable us to know or determine whether we have eternal life. These are our relation to sin, our obedience to the commandments of God, our love for God and man, and the presence in our lives of the Holy Spirit. How do we measure up? Where is the evidence strongest? Where weakest? What can we do about the weak spots?

Before we conclude this study let us look at the concluding verses of the epistle (1 John 5:15-21). We will discover that the word “know” is found six times, the first five of which are *oidamen* (we know). The last “know” is *ginoskomen*.

“And if we know that he hears us . . . we know that we have obtained the requests made of him” (5:15)—“we have the answer already” (WP).

“We know that any one born of God does not sin” (5:18) or “continue to sin” (NIV). Why doesn’t he keep on sinning? “He [Christ] who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.” “It is the Son of God who keeps him safe” (NEB). Although the child of God “has a malignant foe,” we should be grateful to God that “he has also a vigilant Guardian . . . our security is not our grip on Christ but His grip on us?” (EGT).

“We know that we are of God” (5:19), “are children of God” (NIV), or “are of God’s family” (NEB).

“We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding” [“insight,” WMS] (5:20). What has He given us understanding of or insight into? “To know him who is true” [“real, NEB].

Then John adds the glorious truth, “We are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ” (5:20). Then notice the concluding words of this verse: “This is the true God and eternal life.” Notice the uniting of eternal life and the true God, who is the Eternal Person.

If you are demonstrative in your faith, you doubtless feel like saying with me: *Amen and amen*.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is your favorite “know” verse from Scripture?
2. Based on 1 John 5:1-12, what are four evidences John offers that we are “of God”?
3. From Maston’s comments about *ginosko* and *oida*, do you perceive these as separate and distinctive from each other or as two sides of the same coin? Do Maston’s explanations of the Greek words for “know” give you greater confidence in Christ? If so, how?
4. Does the Greek derivation of the terms for “know” provide help for you to consider “knowing” as a verb of Christian practice? If so, how?
5. How does Maston’s review of “know” relate to *having faith* and *being certain*?
6. Is “knowing” a dramatic, instantaneous happening or the result of a developing perspective?
7. Maston references the “challenge” of some of the passages he reviews. How do you perceive his intent? Is “challenge” a viable term for you as you read and interpret Scripture? Why?
8. Does Maston’s use of “Evidence” in his outline give you a sense of tangibility of faith practice?
9. What do you make of Maston’s interpretation of John’s review of the Spirit? How is the Spirit a reality for you?

10. In Maston's conclusion he draws attention to John's use of "*we know*" in 1 John 5:15-20.⁵ How does the emphasis on "we" with regard to these truths speak to you? Should our understanding of the truths of these verses be more collaborative with fellow believers rather than dependent on our individual perspectives?

⁵ Italics added for emphasis.