

A Pit Stop Called Encouragement

Letters from John, Part 6

1 John 2:12-14

In one of the books I'm working my way through these days, entitled *The Great Evangelical Recession*, the author recounted a story that took place on February 15th, 1953.

He writes, As the sun began setting on the Florida Coast, a swarm of more than 100 race cars roared around the Daytona Beach Road Course. Former moonshine runner and NASCAR legend Fonty Flock held a one-minute lead over second-place driver Dick Rathmann. It was the final lap, and there seemed to be no way Flock could lose.

That's when Fonty Flock's eight-cylinder engine began sputtering. Halfway around the final lap, his Oldsmobile race car stalled completely and coasted to a standstill. His one-minute lead disintegrated as the crowd blinked in unbelief.

Fonty Flock had run out of gas.¹

That story piqued my interest . . . motivated me to do a little of my own research and I typed in, and I admit it, for the very first time, I searched by typing in the word, NASCAR. I've never gotten into the sport – but it is really huge, isn't it?

In fact, one of the men in our church is certified and trained to actually take people and give them a brief training session and then go with them as they drive a fast car around one of the major race tracks in the country.

He came up to me a few months ago and said, "Stephen, anytime you want to get out on a race track and take it up to 100 miles an hour, let me know."

I said, "I do that every day on Penny Road."

I'm teasing.

Anyway, I did a little NASCAR research and found out that in major competitions drivers have been known to run out of gas.

I read a number of fascinating stories where professional drivers have lost major races because they ran out of gas in the last few laps of the race; it happened just a couple of years ago in a major, televised race; another driver I read about ran out of gas on the final turn, but was able to coast across the finish line and win.

That was cutting it close.

And the reason they run out of gas is simple – their wives are not there to remind them!

Actually, the race team does what's called, "gambling on gasoline". In other word, they stretch it to the fumes.

Even though pit stops, I learned, are only 10-12 seconds long.

Before any professional race begins, every racing team has planned out what they call their "pit strategy" – how many pit stops they're going to take and when –and how much of a gamble they're going to take on tires and gasoline.

During those precious 10 seconds stops on pit lane, expert crews change the tires, make engine tweaks, feed the driver and refuel the race car.

You simply cannot run a good race without strategically taking pit stops.

That's true for Christianity as well.

The Apostle John doesn't want his children running on empty . . . and we're not just talking about knowledge, but encouragement as well.

John evidently, as we'll discover, doesn't want any of us gambling anything; risking another lap without spiritual encouragement to fuel our spiritual race.

If you read the letters to the churches by these Apostles – like John and Paul and Peter and James – you discover that a recurring theme is:

- encouragement to run the race (1 Corinthians 9:24)
- encouragement to fight the fight (1 Timothy 1:18)
- encouragement to stay the course (2 Timothy 4:7)

In fact, on one occasion, Paul the Apostle wrote to the church in Galatia and effectively said, "***Listen, the reason I'm writing to you is so that you will not lose heart – so that you won't stop doing the right thing (Galatians 6:9).***

The writer of Hebrews encouraged battle worn Jewish believers to, "***Consider Him – Jesus – who endured such hostility by sinners against Himself – consider Him – think about Him – so that you will not . . . lose heart.***" (Hebrews 12:3)

Eugene Peterson paraphrases *Romans 12:11-12*; **“Keep yourselves fueled and aflame; be alert servants of the Master; cheerfully expectant; don’t quit . . . pray all the harder.”**

The Apostle John is effectively waving us all into pit lane . . . he wants us to pull over and refuel.

Especially given the harsh tone and the strong, confrontational warnings he’s just delivered, John will do nothing more than infuse us all with encouragement and inspiration and even spiritual optimism.

He wants us fueled and aflame for Christ.

In chapter 2 of First John, we’ve arrived at verses 12-14. You’ll notice that John seems to pause from giving challenges and demanding changes, to listing blessings and positive perspectives.

These verses contain nothing more than one statement after another of encouragement; six of them, actually.

I want to call them **Six Refreshing Facts of Encouragement.**

As we get into this paragraph, you’ll immediately notice that John is encouraging everyone in the race – not just the experienced – the spiritually mature; but the beginners – the new believers – and then everyone in between.

You could take your pencil or pen and circle the words, *children (v. 12); fathers in verse 13; young men in verse 13; then again at the end of verse 13, a reference to children . . .* and so on.

I want to divide our exposition of this paragraph along the lines of these six statements – these six refreshing facts of encouragement.

1. The first fact is this: Your slate of sins has been forgiven!

Notice verse 12. I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven . . .

The term, little children is actually all inclusive to the family of God.

The word translated little children (teknia) means “born ones.”ⁱⁱ

It isn’t necessarily a reference to new born Christians, but to Christians of all ages.

We are often called the children of God in the scriptures.

In fact, the Apostle John uses the same word in his Gospel account where he writes, **But as many as received Him (Jesus) to them He gave the right to become the children of God. (John 1:12)**

This opening line in *I John 2:12* is actually referring to every Christian. John will address children again at the end of verse 13, but he’ll change the word to designate those who are young in the faith.

Here in verse 12 he’s referring to all the children of God – of all ages and in stages of spiritual maturity.

And he wants every Christian immediately reminded of something incredibly amazing and encouraging – all our sins have been forgiven by the atoning cross-work of Jesus Christ in whom we’ve placed our trust.

We are children of God not because we earned our way into the family – not by merit in the sinner, but because of the infinite merit of the Savior.ⁱⁱⁱ

No matter how old you are in the faith, one of the most disheartening things the enemy of your soul attempts is to try and bury you in the depths of your depravity.

And one of the most encouraging things you can do, evidently, is not to argue with him, but readily agree with him – and then remind him, and yourself, of the cross of Jesus Christ.

John isn’t pulling us over into the pit lane and saying, “Little children, I’m writing to remind you that you are really better people than you think . . . now pull up that low self-image of yours.”

Not hardly . . . he’s effectively reminding us all that we happen to be sinners, but that our sins have all been paid for by Christ and wiped off the slate forever.

He has rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption – the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:13)

The risen Lord blinds Paul on the road to Damascus, redeems him and then commissions him to take the gospel to his world and with that gospel, **open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light . . . so that they may receive forgiveness of sins (Acts 26:18).**

For just over 15 years, from 1991 to 2007, one evangelical seminary conducted a survey among nearly 1,000 Muslims who had converted to Christianity during those same 15 plus years.

Those converted Muslims surveyed represented 50 ethnic groups from 30 different countries – so they weren’t surveying the same neighborhood.

These believers were asked, “What was it about Christianity that made you risk your life and your relationships and place your faith in Jesus Christ?”

One of the most often repeated answers from all of them was the simple fact that they could not be certain of the forgiveness of their sins . . . and the Christians they knew were absolutely convinced they had been forgiven.^{iv}

You want a refreshing, refueling fact?

Every sin you've committed and every sin you will commit is already known – and already paid for – by Jesus Christ, the living, resurrected, Son of God.

2. Refreshing Fact number 2: Your eternal safety is guaranteed by God's signature.

Notice *verse 12 again – your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake.*

He's signed His name to your pardon . . .

- His name is the refining name – for whatever you do in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus (Colossians 3:17)
- His name is the revered name before whom everyone will one day acknowledge that He is Lord indeed (Philippians 2:9-11)
- His name is the redeeming name – for there is no other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12)

Your eternal relationship with God through Christ doesn't become ratified by the credibility of your signature; it is ratified by the credibility of His.

Your forgiveness and security isn't permanent because God is concerned about you keeping your word; He happens to be concerned about keeping His word.

This is all true, *for His name's sake.*

And with that, John concludes his opening statement to *every* child of God.

- The slate of your sins has been forgiven and
- The security of the believer is guaranteed by God's signature.

Now John begins to write to Christians in differing stages of spiritual maturity.

Let's begin with his comments to *children*, and then to *young men* and finally, *to fathers*.

3. Here's refreshing fact number 3: your satisfaction is now in a personal relationship.

John has been telling us what to do and what not to do . . . he knows that we might get the impression that satisfaction in the Christian life is by following the rules.

So he effectively begins by reminding the most vulnerable among us that the issue is not the rules you keep, but a relationship you can enjoy.

Notice that John addresses at *the end of verse 13 – Children* – again. However, John changes the term from to *paidia* – this term refers to a young child still under the authority and care of their parents or guardians.

This is the believer who is still ignorant of Biblical truth of the gospel or perhaps new in the faith and immature in the ways of grace . . . whatever, these are the little lambs in need of care and guidance.

They're going to feel lonely; out of place . . . they've left everyone and entered the church to form everything new. And John says, "Look, I'm writing to you young ones in the faith because you know the Father."

In other words, you have someone who loves you dearly – you happen to have a perfect heavenly Father.

And the truth is, they may not know much else, at this point, right?

They don't know the Book of Malachi from the Book of Maps; they've never heard of the ordinances before and don't know what you mean by fellowship or communion;

And they aren't too sure deacons can be trusted. After all, they spent years cheering against those Demon Deacons, right . . . now they find out we elect them over here.

Childhood is a time of susceptibility to viruses and weaknesses, impulses and deceptions.

You'd think that what John would do to encourage them would be to tell them all the rules of conduct and character.

After all, children need that stuff.

And they do.

One author quoted Dr. Albert Siegel who contributed to the Stanford Observer these observations, "When it comes to rearing children, every society is only 20 years away from total anarchy. Twenty years is all we have to accomplish the task of civilizing the infants who are born into our midst each year. These primitive savages know nothing of our language, our culture, our religion, our values and our relationships. The infant is total ignorant of democracy, decency, respect, honesty,

customs, manners and conventions. The barbarian must be tamed if civilization is to survive.”^v

The church is filled with not only physical children, but spiritual children.

It can get noisy . . . sometimes rambunctious.

Children can become focused on so many things – and so many things might do nothing but distract them.

John says here, “Children, isn’t it wonderful that you’re getting to know your Father . . . focus on your Father.”

No matter how old you grow in the faith, you’ve discovered early that satisfaction never comes from keeping a list of rules, but developing a loving relationship with your Heavenly Father.

4. Fact Number 4: Your service is in view of the final victory

Now John offers encouragement to *young men – young adults in the faith*.

The middle part of *verse 13 reads; I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one*.

John isn’t saying that for the young men the battle is over against the devil. The perfect-tense verb, translated, “to overcome” simply means they are assured of the outcome.^{vi}

You could understand John to be saying, “I am writing to you young men to remind you that a victorious outcome is already yours over the evil one.

And wouldn’t that be encouraging to young people.

They engage in the heat of the battle – they are on the front lines.

George Muller was 27 when he moved to Bristol England, convinced that God wanted him to open an orphanage strictly by faith in His provision . . . and he opened his first orphanage without a nickel to his name.

John Bunyan was 32 when he was jailed for preaching the gospel and there in that jail he penned Pilgrim’s Progress.

William Booth was 36 when he founded the Salvation Army, moving into the slums of East London to reach the poorest of the poor.

David Brainard began his ministry to American Indians when he was 25.

William Cary was in his 20’s when he dedicated himself to overseas missions and 32 when he landed in India.^{vii}

But even the maturing, youth of the faith can lose heart and strength.

Isaiah wrote that *even youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly. Yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary (Isaiah 40:31)*.

Their strength is not in themselves, even though they are young and fueled and inflamed – their strength comes from God.

John adds at the back end of *verse 14* another comment to these faith-filled young warriors – notice, *you are strong (why?), the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one*.

The term John uses here, for *the evil one* is a Biblical term for the devil and it depicts his nature as vicious, destructive and utterly bad.^{viii}

In fact, the word for *evil* used here refers to someone who is not only utterly evil, utterly bad, but a person who wants to drag everyone else down with them.^{ix}

How in the world will the young and growing and vibrant in the faith generation face this evil one?

5. Fact number 5 – Your strength is found in the sword of the Spirit.

Notice their *strength* was abiding in, dwelling in, being immersed in, and saturated by, *the word* of God.

So is it any wonder then that the enemy would seek to turn young adults against the reliability of scripture?

And is it any wonder that one of the church’s greatest challenges in the 21st century is reaching and discipling young adults who are abandoning the truth of God’s word as their source of spiritual compass.

In fact, the great exodus from the church across our nation is in the lives of 18-29 year olds.

Even secular journals newspapers and universities are picking up on the outgoing tide of young people.

One author reported that young adults who presently claim to believe in Jesus Christ, 2.6 million of them are leaving the faith at some point between their 18th and 29th birthday.

That's 260,000 who leave the protestant, "evangelical" church every year. That's 712 who will effectively quit the faith today, and another 712 tomorrow.^x

One of the reasons for this is the simple fact that the Bible had little to do with their shallow faith system to begin with.

One author said that the 18-29 year olds were reared by materialistic parents who effectively shoved God to the sidelines of their lives and thus developed their own view of God who now resembles a moralistic therapeutic Deist, rather than the living Master and Lord of life.^{xi}

In other words, the God their parents barely acknowledged is a God they are finding easy to abandon. Their parent's God was a God who could only seem to quote the Golden rule, who wanted everyone happy doing whatever they felt made them happy – even if it included abortion, divorce, greed or adultery.

To them the vision was lost. God was no longer the God of historic biblical revelation whose highest goal is His own holy glory being longed for and lived for and demonstrated through the lives of believers.

The adults they had grown up around – in the home, in the church – weren't interested in running a race or fighting the good fight or staying the course or persevering in responsibilities and relationships . . . and they certainly didn't sacrifice anything for the sake of Christ or His church or the mission . . . so why bother.

Josh McDowell reports in his 2006 findings that 69 percent of evangelical 18 year olds will leave the church after graduating from high school.

LifeWay Research has concluded that 70 percent of Christian church attendees born after the year 2000 will leave the church by the age of 23.

One more – Barna estimates in a 2010 release that of every five young evangelicals, four will disengage from the church by the age of 29.

In fact, the nationwide departure from the church of evangelicals 30 years of age and younger – has become so noticeable that they have even earned the nickname, de-churched.^{xii}

You have the unchurched – those without any accountable relationship or partnership with a local assembly of believers.

And now you have the de-churched – those who, John will actually write about a little later in this second chapter – *those who went out from among us – who were really not of us; for had they been of*

us – that is genuine believers – they would not have left us. (1 John 2:19)

Now there are some in the church who are watching this exodus and concluding that we really aren't going the way of England and the Netherlands, because as this generation leaves the American church externally, they are retaining their faith internally.

One author boldly said, "That just isn't so. They are quitting the faith, not because they aren't happy with it – they are quitting the faith because they no longer believe it."^{xiii}

And the problem is, the faith they once believed was shallow at best, corrupted at worst – the church was to them – and their parents – a social club you could take or leave; God was to them a Grandfatherly Genie who just wasn't paying off anymore.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus faced the Devil in the wilderness when He was 30.

Barely beyond his 20's.

And He was tempted 3 different ways – and every one of the temptations basically said, "You need to look out for Yourself and you ought to get whatever you want . . . if your Father God is real, you shouldn't be hungry, you shouldn't get hurt and you should make it to the top of the ladder!"

And in every response, Jesus merely quoted scripture in return.

This was nothing less than a sword fight. And at the end of the sword fight, Jesus effectively reminded the Devil that he was going to lose the kingdoms of the earth.

And Jesus set the stage for every one of us who follow Him into battle with the enemy of deception and falsehood and idolatry.

John encourages the youth who are in the battle . . . even though the race is long and battle is fierce and it seems like you're the only one fighting temptation – just remember:

- **First** of all, you're not alone – there are a lot of other children in the family right with you;
- And **secondly**, even though the evil is heavy around you and your strength is being taxed to the very limit – the devil ultimately loses.

He may win a skirmish or two, but he's going to lose the war.

One author wrote that every time you engage in battle, you face a baffled, conquered enemy!^{xiv}

Remind your heart of that . . . and refuel on that truth.

6. One more fact: Your Savior is the everlasting Sovereign.

John now speaks to *the fathers* – in *verse 13 and in verse 14* he says the same precious, encouraging truth – *I am writing to you fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning.*

These are the older saints who've not just grown old in the faith, they've grown up in the faith – they've matured in the truth of who God is and what His words says.

One author said these are they who are rich in faith and ripe in grace.^{xv}

The perfect tense verb translated “*you know Him*” speaks of a personal knowledge of Him in the past and an abiding knowledge of Him in the present.^{xvi}

This is knowledge gained by personal experience.

These older saints know and cherish the truth that God is the God of ages past, and their hope for years to come.

Have you ever talked to a faithful believer of, say 40 or 50 years? Their vocabulary is laced with trust and assurance and faith in their eternal, sovereign Lord.

No wonder we sing of the –

*Faith of our fathers, living still
In spite of dungeon, fire and sword;
Oh, how our hearts beat high with joy
When e'er we hear that glorious word –
Faith – faith of our fathers, holy faith,
We will be true to thee till death.*^{xvii}

That's sung only by those who sound like they want to keep running the race –fighting the good fight – staying the course.

Two thoughts come to mind by way of application:

1. The **first** one is this: no matter what stage you are in spiritually, you don't opt out of personal and spiritual battles.

The truth is, no matter how young in the faith or how old in the faith you are . . . every battle and every new challenge will require personal attention and spiritual discipline.

Faith is not an elective – it's a required course for the maturing disciple.

2. **Secondly**, no matter where you are in your spiritual walk – you never outgrow the need to pull over for refreshing, encouraging truth.

And John the Apostle would have us consider refueling on these truths:

- Your slate of sins has been forgiven
- Your safety is guaranteed by God's signature
- Your satisfaction is in a personal relationship
- Your service is in view of the ultimate victory
- Your strength is found in the sword of the Spirit
- Your Savior is the everlasting Sovereign.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/17/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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- xvi Hiebert, p. 94
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