### “The Messiah’s Name” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Apr. 14, 2024

**1 John 3:1–7**

1See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. 3And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

4 Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. 5You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. 7Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

**Luke 24:47–53**

[Jesus] said to them, “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in the Messiah’s name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. 51While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. 52And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Welcome to First Church. This Sunday we walk in the footstseps of the apostles as they spend more time with Jesus, preparing for change, as he promised. His words filled them with hope and joy and also created some mystery. We also deal with some mystery, while waiting with hope and joy.

There’s mystery in the John passage, that is, the passage from John’s letter, probably first addressed to his own church in Ephesus, and then distributed throughout Asia Minor and Greece. That is, it was read in a major city on the west coast of what now is Turkey, and distributed throughout Turkey and Greece. John says we are now God’s children, but the mystery is “what we will be,” which “has not yet been revealed” (3:2). Will we still be God’s children, but at a more advanced stage of development, more grown-up children, as it were? The passage provokes us to wonder and hope. What does it mean to be spiritual children?

Like children, we are energetic, naïve, excitable, and quite entertaining to our elders. Also like children, we lack experience, we lack understanding, we can buy into bad theories and superstitious answers, we can be duped by clever manipulators, we can allow ourselves to be put down and mistreated. Further, we can also be unrealistically cocky and confident, oblivious to dangers and ignorant of our own limitations. Children do, however, learn from experience and, in most cases, gain some wisdom. So, presumably, we will be *growing* children of God, learning our lessons in the school of love, learning always more about the Father’s love.

Let’s pause on that line of thinking and look at the gospel passage. We also see something there about an implied change of status. The risen Jesus tells the apostles to wait in Jerusalem “until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49), which implies they *don’t* have that power now.

So, is *our* change, promised in 1 John, comparable to the clothing with power that the apostles will experience when the Spirit is poured out on them? Is the change a matter of taking on spiritual power, or is there even more going on? Obviously, there is so much that we don’t know about the afterlife. Death seems to be a great big barrier. What can we know now about what comes next?

All we are given are a few basic principles. John links it with the return of Jesus to earth, but I think what he says also applies to what happens to us after we die. Jesus didn’t return as quickly as the apostles thought he would, so these remarks end up telling us more about the afterlife. John writes “when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Our growing understanding, and what we gain from treating others with loving kindness, will reveal more of the Father to us.

So there is a link between what we will *be* and what we can *see*. Seeing has something to do with spiritual status or receptivity. When our spiritual receptivity is greater, we will be able to *see* more, spiritually. And at the same time, we will *be* more, spiritually. We will have gained spiritual capacity to receive. So, instead of saying “seeing is believing,” he seems to be saying “seeing is being,” or perhaps “seeing is simultaneous with being.” What an interesting revelation!

John goes on to say if we have this hope in us now, then we will purify ourselves, because Jesus is pure (3:3). I think this refers to spiritual abilities and achievement. He goes on to say that we will cease to sin if we abide in him (3:6). Now that’s a remarkable teaching, too! But what strikes me is the basic teaching that we will become like him.

Becoming like Jesus! That’s a stunning and crucial teaching, found in many of the New Testament epistles, and in the Gospel of John. Think about it—becoming like Jesus really amounts to deification. But it is a gradual spiritualizing influence that begins in this life and continues in the afterlife. Imagine the wonder of this experience! There is mystery and a little confusion at the beginning. Then when you believe in Jesus’ Resurrection and in the promise of your resurrection and subsequent transformation, you are filled with wonder and awe. As we share God’s love with others, we begin this transformation. We are saved in the Messiah’s name, that is, in his spiritual power.

Now, there’s still a mystery, at least here on earth. In what *way* will we become like Jesus? Will we be healers and miracle-workers? Will we have the cosmic power of the Creator, the ability to create worlds (Heb 1:2)? I don’t think that is what is meant. I think it is referring to our spirituality, our character, our ability to perceive truth and to radiate goodness, our importing of a little bit of heaven into our lives, our appreciation of beauty, and our advocacy of unity and peace.

We will take on these qualities of Jesus, to the degree possible. We don’t replace Jesus. We don’t become Christs, but we become like little Christs, which is what the word “Christian” literally means. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis said “The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs” (*Mere Christianity* [Collier], 169). We are transformed, in the Messiah’s name.

Answering our earlier question, this is indeed like growing up, spiritually, from children to adults. So, salvation involves continual growth and spiritual transformation.

Tyler Speegle has written about how his church has changed his life. He didn’t at first think he would like that church. They did things differently than he was used to. But, he says, with every “song, every smile and handshake, every sermon . . . something seemed to whisper, ‘There’s a better way.’” He received phone calls of support at crucial times, and he writes, “I now recognize the ‘better way’ as the power of the Holy Spirit.” He recalls what 2 Cor 3:17 says: “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” He now has the “freedom to admit that I don’t have it all together” and the “freedom to cry out with questions without being made to feel guilty for asking.” He says, “The scary thing about freedom is that it throws you into the deep end where your feet can’t touch anymore. You can’t cling to your chains any longer; you’ve been set free. . . Church is so much more than a social event; it’s a family” ([How a Church Changed My Life (churchleaders.com)](https://churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/outreach-missions-articles/267771-how-a-church-changed-my-life.html))

I spoke above about transformation. That has to mean real spiritual progress, and the taking on (in our limited way) of the qualities of God. As Second Peter says, “You . . . may become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4 RSV). How could we ever fulfill this promise? It would take forever. And that’s the point! We have everlasting life as the arena for making this transformative progress. We need to be like him, spiritually, and that’ll be an ongoing process forever. How astonishing is that?

Meanwhile, we are called to spread the word of God’s never-ceasing love and mercy, parenting us in our everlasting growth. A pastor of my acquaintance has a saying, “God loves you, and there’s nothing you can do about it.” His never-ending grace is our spiritual nourishment. Tap into that fountain within you. Drink deeply.