

1 John 4 – Part J

1 John 4:12-16 – Part A

^{1Jn 4:12} No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. ¹³ By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.

When first reading this section of Scripture, the first sentence almost seems completely out of place. John simply says that “**No one has seen God at any time.**” Honestly, it is a very difficult phrase to determine what it means because at first glance it just seems disconnected from everything else that John has been talking about. He has been talking about the love of God and he will begin to talk about God abiding in the believer and the believer abiding in God, but then he just makes this statement that no one has ever seen God. John MacArthur in his commentary approaches this from the perspective that since Christ is no longer visibly present that the only way that people can actually see the love of God is through His love being displayed in the life of believers. The next sentence simply says “**If we love one another...**” In other words, if believers love each other in a meaningful and visible way, then God can be seen in that. It could be stated that the invisible God becomes visible through the love of Christians for one another.¹

Now, I certainly would not argue with any of that, but even though it may be true, it does not seem to provide the answer as to why John would make a statement like this. How does a statement like this actually fit into the overall context of this passage and this chapter? How can we make sense of it being inserted into the text at this point? In the overall context of these last two chapters, John is giving evidence after evidence after evidence of someone who is a true believer. He will say that they are obedient and that they love and care deeply for other believers. He will make that strong argument in v12-16, as well as what will follow. Then he will end in [1 John 5:13](#) with this amazing conclusion,

^{1Jn 5:13} These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

The last phrase of that verse is not included in the NIV, AMP, ESV, NASB, ASV, ISV, RSV, or NRSV. So John’s conclusion is that of assurance – “**that you may know**”. He is stating in a very qualified way that a true believer can know that they have eternal life. So how is that and how does it work? Think of it this way. Even though believers have never seen God, they have seen the work of God both in creation and in their own life personally. For every believer there was that particular time when God clearly manifested His person, His nature, and His love for them. They never saw him, but they knew that God was and is present and active in their life. Over time they have become more conscious and more aware of His presence and His power working in their life, and they are even more convinced of His reality. In order to be like God and display godly attributes and distinctives, there has to be something from God that allows that to happen. That particular attribute is clearly recognized by the believer. Someone

changed them and worked in their life in a remarkable way, and at this point in their life it is an undeniable reality to them.

So what John is communicating to these believers is that even though they may never have actually seen God, they still have seen His work and His power in their life. Most every day when I walk around the field in front of our house, I see deer tracks, car tracks, and tractor tracks all the time. So I know that the deer have been running through the field and the tractor has been in the field and the cars on the dirt driveway. I see the tracks. I see the evidence. I see the proof. The tracks substantiate and confirm what I know is true. In like manner, every genuine believer can see the tracks, the evidence, and the proof of God's work in their life even though they have never actually seen God in a visible way. John is going to tell his readers that the tracks and the evidence are obedience and love for other Christians. Those will be the tracks that provide assurance to the believer. If a believer has those two things in their life, they will have assurance. Just think about this for a moment, because up to this point I have not even mentioned the greatest evidence and proof which is the person of Christ and the testimony of Scripture from beginning to end. There is no denial of the historical Christ and his salvific work. It is one of the most documented historical facts of all time. Even time is dated from His birth. He was not some phantom as the Gnostics believed and taught. To the contrary, in both His incarnation and His atoning work on the cross, His resurrection out of the grave, and His ascension into heaven is seen the greatest proof ever given.

It seems that many people lack assurance and that they seem afraid of many things. They certainly seem afraid of the future. They are saved and they love God, but for whatever reason they still lack assurance and often times have great fears. In fact, notice what John says in [1 John 4:18](#),

^{1Jn 4:18} There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.

Many believers have this longing and yearning and desire to know that they are truly of God in some concrete or even visible way. If they could just "see" God, then everything would be okay.² Obviously, in [John 14](#) Philip had this same exact problem. Notice what he said there in [John 14:8](#) after Jesus had talked to them about going and preparing a place for them and then coming back to get them at a later time.

Jn 14:8 Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us."

"Lord, if you would just let us see God the Father for a few moments, then everything would be great and we would be settled in our assurance. We have seen you and watched you do miraculous things, and it has been great, but just this one last thing would really help give to us the kind of assurance that we really need – okay Lord?"

Now we know what Jesus replied in [John 14:9](#),

Jn 14:9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

If you will allow me to say it this way, Jesus simply told Philip to look at the God tracks in Jesus' life. The tracks of God's work in a person's life is the evidence that God has been present in their life and is real. Listen carefully. Everything that surrounds believers at this present moment is uncertain.

Everything is changing, and most of it is not good. Life as we know it may come to a very abrupt end. We know from the book of Revelation that that is exactly what will happen. Things will be so evil and so ungodly that God will have to make a new heavens and a new earth as part of His cleanup effort after He has displayed His final judgment on an ungodly world. The Bible says that everything that can be shaken will be shaken. Even if men are not saved, they can clearly sense that some inevitable consequences are nearby. There are wars and rumors of wars, global warming, wicked men in high places, terrorism, nations crumbling, disease and starvation, natural disasters, nuclear weapons of mass destruction, and evil men waxing worse and worse and worse. Under those conditions, it is imperative that believers know beyond any shadow of a doubt that they are saved. The church is much further along than John was, and the impending inevitability of these things seems very near. No wonder people long for stability and certainty and assurance. No wonder people's hearts will be failing them for fear. [Luke 21:26](#) says,

Lk 21:26 men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken.

No wonder deception will be normal in the day of God's judgment. [2 Thessalonians 2:9-12](#) declares,

2Th 2:9 The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders,¹⁰ and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.¹¹ And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie,¹² that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

If it were not for the visible evidence of God's great and marvelous salvation, we should all be afraid of what is awaiting the world. However, we have God's tracks, God's proofs, and God's evidences in our personal lives that provide great assurance. Are we guaranteed safety from persecution? No, we are not. [2 Timothy 3:12](#) says,

2Ti 3:12 Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

Are we guaranteed freedom and independence from trials and hardships when these things arrive? No, we are not. [1 Peter 4:12](#) says,

2Ti 3:12 Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

However, what every believer is guaranteed is an eternal salvation from a sovereign God who is in complete control of all things. [John 10:28-29](#) says,

Jn 10:28 And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.²⁹ My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of My Father's hand.

So, what is it that the believer knows? Well, [1 John 4:13](#) says,

1Jn 4:13 By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.

That is what "we know". The verb "know" is in the present tense, indicative mood, and active voice. It is something that each believer knows as a fact, and they keep knowing it all the time. As a believer,

right now, this very moment, because God has given His Spirit to you, He is the guarantee of your assurance. [1 John 4:16](#) intensifies it even more and says that the believer has “**known**” the love of God.

^{1Jn 4:16} **And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.**

It does not matter that none of us have ever visibly seen God. To the contrary, we have seen the evidence of God and the certainty of his sovereign existence in everything that surrounds us. There is no need to be doubting and wondering and questioning and agonizing over the certainty of your salvation. John is writing all of these things to provide assurance. Just ask yourself the simple question – “Am I obedient to God and do I love other Christians?” If the answer to those questions is “yes”, be assured that God dwells in you.

In each study of a new section of [1 John](#), it is always amazing to see how much John repeats himself. It is like he cannot say something without saying it multiple times. For instance, in this section of Scripture notice how many times that John mentions God abiding in the believer or the believer abiding in God.

[1 John 4:12](#) - **If we love one another, God abides in us.**

[1 John 4:13](#) - **By this we know that we abide in Him, and He (abides) in us...**

[1 John 4:15](#) - **God abides in him, and he (abides) in God.**

[1 John 4:16](#) – **...he who abides in love abides in God, and God (abides) in him.**

John talks about this aspect of abiding seven different times in just four verses. In fact, because of the way that John continues to emphasize these two distinct aspects of abiding, it becomes evident that the two cannot be separated. In other words, when God is truly abiding and living his life in a believer, that believer’s life will be abiding in God. Stated the other way, when a believer is abiding in God, it is only because God is actually abiding in that individual. The two cannot be separated.

Another point that John makes is that whenever God places his very nature into an individual, that nature is “**perfected**” both internally and externally in the believer. John uses the word “**perfected**” three different times in his letter (2:5, 4:12, 4:17). The word “**perfected**” is the Greek word “*teleioō*”. In the NKJV it is translated “**has been perfected**” which does not seem to really capture the tense of the word. “**Perfected**” is in the perfect tense which is considered by most Greek scholars to be the most important tense in the Greek language. The perfect tense refers to an action that was completed in the past, but is having an ongoing impact on the present. As an obvious example, as believers we were saved in the past, and that salvation is having a continuing impact on our life. That is why in most of the translations (KJV, NIV, AMP, ESV, NASB, ASV, ISV, RSV, and NRSV) it reads as “**is perfected in us**” or “**is made complete in us**”. That translation better captures the fact that this work of God is still an ongoing and continuing work. The idea behind the word is that of being **made** complete, of accomplishing, of perfecting, and of consummating that which is godly in a person’s character.³ In the English language, we often would use the word “mature” or “maturity” to reflect this idea. In [1 John](#), it refers to the perfection and completeness of the love of God as it is worked into a believer’s life over a period of time. It is the idea that the believer finds completeness and fulfillment in the love of God. The Scriptures, for instance, find completeness and fulfillment in the cross. Faith finds fulfillment in godly works that glorify Christ. In Hebrews it refers to enabling someone to be able to stand before God.⁴ The point that

John makes is that the perfection of God’s love is demonstrated when the believer keeps the Word of God. [1 John 2:5](#) says,

1Jn 2:5 But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him.

In [1 John 4:12](#) he says that the perfection of God’s love is demonstrated when a believer truly loves other believers.

1Jn 4:12 No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.

So the evidence of the love of God being “perfected” in a believer is twofold: (1) obedience, and (2) love for other believers. So at this point, it should be obvious that John is providing definition for the evidence of maturity and completeness in a believer. As stated earlier, this is an ongoing work of God. Just suppose for a moment that someone that you know is disobedient and has no obvious love and care for other believers, then John’s conclusion would be simple to understand. He would simply say that God is NOT abiding in that person. That would be his conclusion from these verses. So once again, we as believers are confronted with the issue of whether or not we are willing to take God at His Word. If the evidence of abiding in God is obedience and love for other Christians, then the negative is true that the evidence of not abiding in God is disobedience and a lack of love for believers. As stated so often in this study, it is not sufficient to simply say the right thing. There must be evidence that confirms the reality of an individual’s confession, and if that evidence is not apparent, then in all likelihood the individual in question is lost and in deep need of Christ. Because of all of the positive statements that John has made, it appears that at this point in his letter that he is simply reaffirming that the genuine evidence of salvation should be apparent in the believer’s life - obedience and love for other believers.

Obviously, and without overstating the issue, John is concerned that his readers are abiding in God. V16 is the last time that John will speak about the idea of abiding, but from [1 John 2:14](#) through [1 John 4:16](#) he uses the word “abide” or “abides” 20 different times. Among other things, he says that whoever does the will of God abides forever, that an anointing from God abides in the believer, that abiding in Christ gives confidence when Christ appears, that whoever abides in Christ does not habitually sin against God, that that individual who keeps God’s commandments abides in Him, that if a believer loves other Christians it is evidence that God abides in the believer, that we know that Christ abides in us because we have been given the Holy Spirit, and much more. The benefits of abiding in Christ simply cannot be measured, and it becomes a great source of assurance for the believer.

ENDNOTES

¹ MacArthur, 168-169.

² Lloyd-Jones, 456.

³ Strong, 1409.

⁴ Kittel, 1165.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Kittel, Gerhard, and Gerhard Fried. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

Lloyd-Jones, Martyn. *Life in Christ - Studies in 1 John*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2002.

MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: John 1-11*. Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 2006.

Strong, James. *The New Strong's Expanded Dictionary of Bible Words*. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001.