

## Misusing I John 5:13

Over the years, I have talked with many people who claim to be Christian but seem to think their salvation depends on whether or not they do enough good works. If you ask such people if they expect to be in heaven, they will likely tell you that it is impossible for us to know for sure if we will make it to heaven. After all, if it depends on how many good works we do, how could anyone know? Over the years, I have often quoted the first part of I John 5:13 in an attempt to prove that Christians can know for sure whether they will be in heaven. While it is our duty to help people realize that salvation is by grace through faith, I now know that I John 5:13 was not written to prove that Christians can know for sure that they will be in heaven. This was not John's purpose for writing it. I am writing this to demonstrate from the syntax and the context why John wrote this verse. Of all the most popular English versions, the New King James is perhaps the best English rendering:

*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.*

Before going further, I am forced to address a problem that developed over the past several decades as it relates to this verse. 4.4% of the ancient Greek manuscripts do not include that last part of the verse. Even though so few manuscripts leave it off, most popular English Bibles do not include it. To make things worse, the 4.4% of manuscripts that support these English renderings are riddled with all sorts of erroneous variants making them the least trustworthy. As a result, your translation might not include the words, "*and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.*" This is unfortunate because without these words, John's main purpose for writing the book is less apparent. Rather than follow the crowd over the cliff, I will stick to the original words<sup>1</sup> that John used as the basis for the rest of this paper.

As John concludes his letter, he states his purposes for writing it in 5:13. Many people falsely assume that if one's life passes the evaluation against the things John states in his letter, he can be 100% sure that he has eternal life. Such an understanding can only result from an overly simplistic interpretation of I John 5:13.

It is critical to note who John has in mind on the basis of 5:13. The people he has in mind are "*you who believe<sup>2</sup> and keep on believing in the name of the Son of God.*" At this point, you might protest saying that the underlined words don't appear in the Bible and are therefore not valid. But you must keep in mind that the Bible was not originally written in English. It was written in Greek. So, if you look deeper, you will realize that the word believe here is the customary Greek present tense which denotes action that is happening and continues to happen. So, this **knowing** is something that applies only to those who continue believing. Those are the ones who have eternal life. And since their life is not yet over, they really don't know 100% sure that they will continue believing. The proof will come only if they continue believing.

We all want to think that we will continue believing and we earnestly pray that we will continue believing. But technically, nobody can know for sure until he has actually continued believing to the end. If you are 100% sure you will continue believing, then maybe you should read I Corinthians 10:12.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, remember that I John 5:13 is written to those who believe and continue believing. At the end, you will know for sure (100%) whether you were one of them or not. So, to be biblically accurate,

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<sup>1</sup> Ταῦτα ἔγραψα ὑμῖν τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ ἵνα εἰδῆτε ὅτι ζωὴν αἰώνιον ἔχετε καὶ ἵνα πιστεύητε εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ,

<sup>2</sup> This is a present tense participle (adjectival) that should be understood to convey customary Greek present tense. In other words, it could be rendered, "*to those who believe and continue believing.*"

<sup>3</sup> "*Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall*" (I Corinthians 10:12).

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assuming your life passes the evaluation based upon I John, you can say, “I know I have eternal life if I continue believing.”<sup>4</sup>

Next, let me call your attention to the verbs underlined in our text below:

*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.*

In the Greek, these verbs are in the subjunctive mood. This means that they are describing action that is not absolutely certain. This is why the translations use the English word “may” before these verbs. John wrote his letter that they “**might** know” and that they “might believe.” He could have used other wording. He could have said something like this: If your life passes the evaluation based upon the things I wrote here, then **you have eternal life**. Since he didn’t, let us consider why John used these verb forms because they give us a clue as to his purpose for writing the letter.

Consider the word “believe” underlined in our verse above. The Greek word here is πιστεύητε. It is in the subjunctive mood, present tense. In all of the New Testament, this form of believe is only found twice and only by John. Normally, the NT authors used the aorist tense when using believe in the subjunctive mood. Whenever an author veers from the conventional form of a word and chooses to use one that is very unusual, normally that means he is trying to draw attention to something. Because this is such a highly unusual choice by John, we should most likely conclude that he is drawing attention to the idea of continuation since he chose the present tense. This is undoubtedly why the New King James translators rendered it, “*that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.*”

Suddenly, I John 5:13 begins to make more sense. Perhaps John’s single greatest purpose for writing the letter was to give them strong hope and reason to continue following Jesus. Like the other New Testament writers, John did not want the Christians to give up. He wanted them to continue. By evaluating their lives on the basis of what he said in this letter, they should have strong reason to believe that they are indeed believing and as long as they continue believing, they can know that they have eternal life. On the contrary, without his letter, they have less assurance that they are truly believing. Without that assurance, they would be vulnerable to the attacks of the evil one who is always telling Christians that they might as well give up because their eternal life is completely uncertain.

In summary, based upon the syntax and context, it is most reasonable to conclude that at the conclusion of his letter, John is telling them why he wrote it. He wrote it so that they might know that they have everlasting life (assuming they are true believers) and that knowing this gives them great hope and reason to continue believing. In light of these things, to handle God’s Word accurately and reverently, we probably should not use I John 5:13 in evangelism as the basis for talking about salvation by grace. But if we do, we should be ready to explain the true purpose for John writing it. Otherwise, if we quote I John 5:13 in our evangelism, we will probably misrepresent him. At the very least, don’t tell people that if they begin to follow Jesus, they can be 100% sure that they will end up in heaven. And if you do say such things, at least add the qualifier, “**if** you continue to follow Jesus.” They need to know that according to the New Testament, if a person stops following Jesus, they have no reason to believe that they have eternal life!

Note: If you are interested, you may find sentence diagrams of I John 5:13 in the following links:

[Sentence diagram of I John 5:13 in English.](#)

[Sentence diagram of I John 5:13 in Greek.](#)

Thomas Bear, June 22, 2019

Οὐαὶ μοί ἐστιν ἂν μὴ εὐαγγελίζωμαι (Προς Κορινθίους Α 9:16)

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<sup>4</sup> This idea of continued believe being requisite for salvation may be found throughout the New Testament.

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