

## **Real Life, Real Fellowship, Real Joy**

This morning we begin a study of the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of John so please turn with me to 1<sup>st</sup> John chapter 1. As I've been reading through this letter I am struck by how encouraging and convicting it is. Let's pause and ask the Lord to help us clear away the clutter and distractions that might keep us from hearing what God has to say to us in this letter.

### **Background of 1<sup>st</sup> John**

Although John doesn't identify himself, there is little doubt that this epistle, along with the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> epistle, were written by the same John who wrote the gospel of John and the book of Revelation. The Apostle John was chosen by Jesus to be one of the inner three, Peter, James, and John. Of those three, John seemed to have an especially close relationship with Jesus, as he describes himself in the gospel as "the one whom Jesus loved" and at the last supper when Peter wanted inside information about who Jesus' betrayer was, he asked John to ask Jesus as he reclined with his head on Jesus' breast. It was also John to whom Jesus' entrusted his mother's care as he hung on the cross.

John lived to an old age, outliving all the other apostles; and the time came when he was the only remaining person alive who had experienced Jesus' ministry up close and personal. Can you imagine how incredible it would be to talk to someone who had been there when Jesus walked the earth, who could tell you what Jesus was like, who could remember stories that he hadn't included in his gospel, that weren't written anywhere else, and you knew those stories and memories were genuine because he had been there. Think about how amazing it would be to listen to someone who had actually been with Jesus tell about the things he witnessed. So due to his status as an apostle of Jesus, and because of his longevity of life, by the time John wrote his epistles, he had a unique status in the church and was known as "the elder". Believers eagerly sought him out to hear his teaching and to get his perspective on issues and questions facing the early church cause he was the last apostle left, the last person who had walked with Jesus up close and personal.

But there is another reason why believers want to be around John. John has a true pastor's heart and they know he loves them. John may have been a "son of Thunder" with some rough edges when Jesus called him, but there was a gentleness and a loving heart in John that probably was the reason Jesus felt so close to him. And we see that in the personal nature of his letters, as he writes to his flock, and tenderly calls them his little children and his beloved. He isn't a hireling in it for the money or prestige, he loves the church the Lord has entrusted to him with the love that Jesus has for his flock and that engenders trust in believer's hearts. There is no self-promoting, hidden agenda with John. You can trust that what he says, he says from a heart of genuine love.

### **1 John 1:1-4**

When I was in high school, I took a writing class and did very well at it. My teacher, Mr. Wood, was a great guy and my favorite teacher, and he was always very complimentary of my work, and I got consistently high grades on my writing in his class. One day he gave us a writing assignment, and I remember feeling so confident – even cocky – about my writing skills that I threw all literary caution to the wind and in the name of creativity wrote whatever came into my mind to say. I remember writing run on sentences and parenthetical statements that randomly interrupted my flow of thought and even contradicted myself, all the while thinking I was writing a literary masterpiece that transcended the rules. When I turned it in, I anticipated how impressed Mr. Wood would be with this expression of literary genius.

As it turned out, he had other students evaluate and grade our work before he gave it his final grade. Even better. Not only would Mr. Wood be impressed, but one of my classmates would get to appreciate what real writing looked like (and be impressed). I only hoped that they wouldn't be so discouraged by my work that they would give up on writing themselves. Finally the day came when Mr. Wood handed back our graded work, and I was shocked to find all kinds of red circles and red question marks, and a big F that was crossed out and replaced by a D! When I spoke to Mr. Wood about it, he told me that the kid who graded it gave it the F and asked Mr. Wood if I even knew how to write. Mr. Wood explained that usually I was a decent writer and generously changed my grade to a D-. As it turns out, run on sentences and parenthetical interruptions and contradictory statements usually doesn't make for good writing.

My writing was inspired by pride and cockiness. As John writes this letter he, of course, is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and he packs some amazing truth in these first few verses, but the result is an awkwardly complicated opening sentence. Dodd calls it a "grammatical tangle". In the Greek the first three verses are one long sentence, with the main verb that tells us where John's going with this doesn't even appear until verse 3, and he opens up with four relative clauses expressed with the word "which": "that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked and our hands have touched..." Then he interrupts his flow of thought with a parenthetical statement in verse 2 so much so that he needs to go back and add another relative clause – *that which we have seen and heard...* just to regain his original flow of thought.

It's a little complicated but well worth taking the time to unpack it. John is talking about Jesus and the gospel of eternal life that Jesus came to bring. Like he does in his gospel, John opens with the eternalness of Christ: *That which was from the beginning...* When it comes to the eternalness of God it's a concept that is impossible for our finite minds to understand or convey. There is no reference point, no beginning, no end. If we time-traveled back 500 million billion years ago we would still be an infinity away from day one for God because there was no day one for God. He has always existed and will always exist. God has no beginning and no ending.

So the closest we can get to a "beginning" is to start the clock when God created time and matter. At that beginning moment Jesus was there because Jesus is God. In the beginning God started the clock when He created time, but there would come a point in time when the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son, the Word of life, entered history as a man – that's what John means when he writes in verse 2 the life was "made manifest". Jesus is life – eternal life - and that life was made manifest as a knowable man and John is saying, "those of us who were there heard him speak with our own ears. I know his voice – could pick it out of any crowd. I know the sound of his laughter, can still hear the timber of his voice when he got angry, can still hear the compassion in his voice when he healed the leper or forgave the sinful woman. I heard the authority in his voice when he spoke to the wind and the waves or the demoniac and they obeyed him. Still sends chills down my spine – that authority was real and like nothing I've ever heard before or since. I saw him with my eyes. I watched him, lived with him, ate with him, traveled with him. I saw him do miracles, I saw people healed, ate the bread and fish that he multiplied. And I touched him. I slapped him on the back, took bread from his hand, leaned my head on his breast as we ate that last supper."

I want to pause to point out something that is essential for us to know if we're to understand this letter and why John is taking such pains to describe the firsthand experience that he had with Jesus. This letter was written sometime between 85 and 90 AD and the church is 50 or 60 years old now, and there were certain teachings that were making serious headway in the church, under the main umbrella of Gnosticism. There were variations but basically Gnosticism taught that all physical matter is evil (or at least inferior to spiritual realities) and that salvation is by mystical, secretive, knowledge. It gave a blank check to sin it up and still be holy in God's eyes because God doesn't care about our physical bodies.

We can be immoral, and at the same time holy. Compartmentalization of the flesh and the spirit. But to teach this, they had to deny that Jesus came in the flesh (which is evil). So some Gnostics taught that Jesus was never a physical being, he was a spiritual phantom who just appeared to be physical. Others taught that Jesus was a physical being, but the Christ, the divine Son of God, came upon Jesus after Jesus' baptism and left him before the cross.

John strongly refutes this by saying that he and the apostles testify and proclaim that Jesus came in the flesh, manifest as a man that they could hear and see and touch. The difference between *testify* and *proclaim* is important. Testify comes from the Greek word *martyreisthai* from which we get the word "martyr". It means to witness about something we've experienced. Proclaim indicates an authority that comes from being commissioned. They testify because they knew and experienced Jesus, they proclaim because they were commissioned by Jesus to proclaim the gospel. So they have the credibility of being eye-witnesses, and they have the authority of being commissioned by Christ himself.

Here's why this is so relevant for the church today. These heresies weren't being presented as contradictions of Jesus or the Bible, they were presented as natural evolutions of the Lord's teachings. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would bring us into all truth, and these Gnostic teachers were arguing that this was the "next step" of that "all truth" and it was essential for the church to accept this new revelation if it was going to keep up with the times. This is relevant today because there are some really serious departures from the clear teaching of the Word of God entering the church today in the name of keeping up with the times. I can't emphasize enough how dangerous it is when we adjust the scriptures to fit our society's values. That's what apostasy is. That's where heresy comes from.

There are things that can change and develop with the times. We're not wearing the same clothing or hair styles that they wore in Jesus' day. Our style of teaching and preaching and worship is different. Methods can change but the core message must never be fiddled with – Jesus doesn't give us that option. We can depart from his truth, we can't change it. Beware of anyone who urges you to reject clear teaching of scripture in the name of staying current with the times and the culture.

In verse 3 John tells the reason for their proclamation: *so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ*. It's all about a living, expanding fellowship!

Jesus came to draw followers into a living, loving fellowship with him and with his heavenly Father. Out of those followers, Jesus chose 12 to be apostles and out of the 12 he chose 3 to be his closest friends and confidants. John was a part of that rich, amazing fellowship. It was fellowship with God's own Son and with God Himself. But it was never God's plan for that fellowship to stop there. The word of life entrusted to John and the apostles was to be fearlessly proclaimed so that that circle of fellowship would grow and expand ever larger. John and the apostles didn't want to keep their circle of fellowship small, they proclaimed the gospel so that whoever believed in Jesus Christ would be welcomed into fellowship with them, and their fellowship was with God Himself and His Son Jesus Christ! Jesus came to invite us into rich fellowship with God through the gospel. John records Jesus praying in John's gospel chapter 17, *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*. Eternal life is knowing God and Jesus. If we have relationship – fellowship – with God and Jesus, we have eternal life, because that's what eternal life is.

This fellowship answers our deepest longing for relationship and our deep loneliness apart from fellowship. There is a deep loneliness that characterizes the human race. It's like we're all looking for a deeper connection, and if we don't make fellowship connections, there will be a loneliness at our core. Loneliness isn't being alone, it's feeling unconnected from meaningful relationship with others. You can

feel alone in a crowd.

We began last year by focusing on the importance in the church of connecting relationally with God and each other. John brings us back to that essential priority here in verse 3. Fellowship with each other and with God is the core of the gospel. And that fellowship isn't to be a "us four and no more" kind of closed circle, but it is to be an ever expanding, ever growing circle. Sometimes groups of people, even churches, can get really tight relationally, doing fun things together, laughing at inside jokes, sharing comfortably on pretty deep levels, and try to protect that fellowship by rejecting new people from entering it. Churches can subconsciously make new people feel unwelcome, even treat them as intruders. All in the name of preserving close knit fellowship. That's not what God intends. The Lord wants us to grow in depth of fellowship as well as breadth of fellowship as new people are constantly being added and welcomed to our fellowship. Jesus calls us into fellowship with one another, and at the core of that fellowship is God our Father and Jesus our Savior.

John always likes to tell his readers why he is writing what he writes. In this letter he gives four reasons why he writes it, and in verse 4 we come to the first reason: *And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.*

Translators cannot be sure if what John wrote should be translated *so that your joy may be complete* or *so that our joy may be complete*. The most likely answer is *so that our joy may be complete*, meaning John's joy, his co-laborer's joy, the reader's joy – all of us, *our* joy might be complete. John says I proclaimed the gospel so that you might have fellowship with us, and our fellowship is with the Father and Jesus, and all together, we might have joy together. Our joy –all of us might experience the joy that Jesus alone gives.

As we study this book, let's remember that Jesus wants to fill our hearts with joy. The gospel of Jesus is a gospel of joy. It causes our hearts to ring with joy that nothing else in all the world can give us. Real joy. Lasting joy. Joy that fills our days with purpose now, and will explode in our hearts when Jesus welcomes us into his eternal kingdom and our eternal home.

It's ironic that some of the most unhappy people in the world are those who have the most of what the world has to offer. Millionaires and famous people are often miserable. Jesus is right when he says it does not profit a person to gain the whole world and lose our soul in the process. The world doesn't hold the key to joy – joy longs for something more. So, CS Lewis writes, joy comes as a pang, a stab of desire, a longing for something more. Certain moments can awaken this pang, like a beautiful sunrise, or a quiet walk on the beach, but that longing is never satisfied in the moment. That's what joy is – a deep longing for more, for God, for Christ. Jesus didn't come to make us miserable, but to awaken a desire for more, a desire for joy. CS Lewis writes:

*"It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."* CS Lewis

What Jesus offers us is enough to fill our hearts with lasting, genuine, overflowing joy. John didn't write this letter to bum us out, to rake us over the coals, to get some things off his chest. He wrote this letter so that our joy might be complete. As we step into closer fellowship with our heavenly Father, and His Son Jesus, and one another, and grow in love for the Lord and each other, joy – real joy – will grow in our hearts.

By This We Know Love  
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Real life. Real fellowship. Real joy. That's what the Lord has for us in Christ and will give to us in this amazing letter. Because in this letter, we will be drawn closer to Christ, if we open our hearts to its message. Let's go to the Lord and ask Him to fill us to overflowing.