



Potomac Hills

Presbyterian Church, PCA

By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

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1 John 1:1-4

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English Standard Version

“Invited by Christ”

This is the 1st sermon in the series on the New Testament books of 1, 2, 3 John entitled, *“Walking with Christ when Faith is Tested.”*

1 John 1:1-4

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—² the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—³ that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.⁴ And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”

INTRODUCTION: *What is this book about?*¹

This is the first sermon in this series on **the Epistles**, the Letters, of John. I just finished preaching through **the Gospel** of John a month ago, where you heard ... **very attentively** ... 79 sermons over 20 months. And I started it by pointing out some key things I thought we needed to learn from John.

We must know **why** the church is a community ... and then **be** a community.

We must know **why** Christians are loving ... and then **be** loving people.

We must know **why** Christianity is believable ... and then **act** like **we really do** believe

¹ Some of the introduction is adapted from the article “Introduction to First John” by Dr. Sam Storms, Enjoying God Ministries, 11/3/06, found at www.EnjoyingGodMinistries.com; *The Epistles of John: Tyndale New Commentaries* by John R. W. Stott, pages 49-50; and *The Message of John's Letters* by David Jackman, pages 15-17.

it. And we must know **why** Jesus Christ is the not only the most meaningful person who ever lived, we must know **why** He brings meaning to each one of our lives, and we must know **why** it is **Jesus Christ** who lives, and reigns, and is coming again.

And we must be able to tell others in a way **they can understand!**

And **that** was the purpose of the Gospel of John, **John 20:30-31**, "*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; **but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.***"

Strangely enough, those are **also** key themes in the Epistles of John.

But there are some key differences. While the Gospel of John was written to the **world**, the Epistles of John were written to the **church**. The Apostle John was based in Ephesus, and it's most likely that this letter was written to the churches in Asia Minor, much as the Book of Revelation was.

The gospel was written for unbelievers to **arouse** faith where the epistle was written for believers to deepen their **assurance** of faith.

John's purpose for readers of the gospel was that through faith they might **receive** life; John's purpose for readers of the epistle was that they might know that they **already have** life.

The gospel contains "**signs**" to induce faith; the epistles contain "**tests**" by which to judge that faith.

The enemies of the truth in the **gospel** are **unbelieving** Jews who **doubt**, not the historicity of Jesus (whom they could see and hear!), but whether He is the Christ, the Son of God; the enemies of the truth in the **epistle** are **professing** Christians (although the "tests given here" show that they are lying) and whose theology of Jesus is distinctly **docetic** and **gnostic** in nature.

Docetism was an opinion that Jesus had no human body and only **appeared** to have died on the cross. Docetists didn't deny the divinity of Christ, but they did deny the humanity of Jesus.

Gnosticism were the beliefs of early Christian cults that valued their own **special, revealed knowledge of God** as a means to attain redemption for the spiritual element in man, separating it from the physical element.

The purpose of 1st John is to expose **mere professors of faith in Christ** (non-believers) and to confirm **true possessors of Christ by faith** (believers) by means of the application of certain "**tests of life.**" Such is done with a view to granting assurance of eternal life to true Christians, **1 John 5:13**, "*I write these things to you who **believe** in the name of the Son of God that you may **know** that you have eternal life.*"

However, the problem that existed in the church was that people **couldn't tell** who the real Christians were. There were false teachers who **claimed** to believe in Christ, but **refused** to live like it, and the young Christians in the church were confused. False **teaching** always leads to false **living**, and the ethical implications of Gnosticism are John's concern throughout these letters.

Here the false teachers claimed to have attained **moral perfection** through their superior enlightenment — their special, revealed knowledge of God. They claimed that **they no longer sinned**, but they obviously still did. This seems to have led these teachers into an arrogant superiority, which despised ordinary Christians, who they said, remained ignorant and in darkness. Such an attitude led them to separate themselves as a new moral and spiritual elite.

These false teachers' **theological** error consisted in denying that Jesus was "*the Christ*" (2:22; 5:1), denying that He was "*the Son of God*" (2:23; 4:15), and denying that He had "*come in the flesh*" (4:2). The focus of their attack was on the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Their ethical error had two ingredients: **first**, a lack of obedience to the commands of Christ that bordered on outright decadence; and **second**, an absence of brotherly love and compassion. The unrighteous lifestyle is exposed in **1 John 2:4**, "*Whoever says "I know Him" but does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.*" And the unloving attitude is seen in **1 John 2:9**, "*Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness.*"

There's clearly a concern with the disconnect between **profession** and **practice**. So the Apostle John steps in. John Stott says that John gives them **three primary tests** to expose the false teachers who **professed** Christ, but didn't **possess** Christ. He says, "We may conclude, then, that against the Christological heresy, the moral [indifference] and the arrogant lovelessness of Gnosticism, John lays his emphasis on three marks of authentic Christianity, namely belief in Jesus as the Christ come in the flesh [the **doctrinal** test], obedience to the commandments of God [the **holiness** test] and brotherly love [the **social** test]".

In other words, John tells them, and us, that the way to tell if someone is a false teacher is by looking at his life and teaching to see if he is a man of faith, if he is a man of holiness, and if he is a man of love.

And if he is, then you can trust his teaching.

But if **he's not**, John has some of the harshest words in the New Testament for these people. Those who **"fail"** the tests are described as children of the devil (3:10), not from God (4:3), of the spirit of error (4:6), not having the truth in them (1:8), not having His word in them (1:10), not having the love of the Father in them (2:15), not really of us (2:19), not having the love of God abiding in them (3:17), not able to love God whom they have not seen (4:20), in darkness until now (2:9), not having seen or known Him (3:6), abiding in death (3:14), and not from God (4:6). **All of which** accurately describes an unbeliever.

Some 2,000 years later, the need for John's teaching to be heard, received and applied is as great as ever. All sorts of ingenious distortions of Biblical Christianity are out there. Biblical behavior is under attack within the church, as well as outside it, in such matters as sexuality or the sanctity of human life.

We may laugh at the fantastic speculation of the Gnostics, but is not the heresy of **the supremacy of knowledge** as alive as ever it was? Do we not need to learn from John that it's man's sinful rebellion against God that's our chief problem ... **not** his ignorance? Isn't it still true "that light without love is darkness?"

We are not lacking contemporary teachers who, while claiming to build on an apostolic foundation, want to take Christians on to "deeper" truths beyond Scripture and to a fuller life. Adding to Scripture has probably caused more heresy and division in the church than denying certain truths or subtracting from the Bible. '*The gospel and ...*' is at the root of so many errors.

John will help us to resist the fashion that sees the revelation of God in Scripture as dated and inadequate. What Scripture said, it still says. And what Scripture says, God says.

As we will see, the errors of John's day were really an accommodation of Christian faith to the prevailing ideas of the secular culture. In every generation the church is challenged by the world, either to confront or to absorb its culture, as **Romans 12:2** says, "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern*

what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Today we are in danger of reflecting the philosophy of our society and not challenging it. That’s why we so often base our judgment and conduct on our feelings and experiences rather than on God’s revealed truth. It’s why we’re conditioned by various subjective viewpoints rather than by the unchanging objective realities of God and His Word. The Apostle John doesn’t attempt a detailed critique of error here; he has no need to do that. **He proclaims** the truth in the characteristic confidence that where **the truth** is declared and believed, error will be undermined and will ultimately collapse.

And we’re living in a day and age where we need that truth far more than we realize. So let’s dive into this text and see what it says ...

v. 1: **THE MESSAGE IS REAL** ²

*“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning **the word of life**—“*

The opening of the letter, without any formal preliminaries, is as **startling** as it is **difficult**. In the original, the object is placed first and expanded by a number of clauses, until we eventually reach the main verb **‘we proclaim’** in verse 3.

Because this is so difficult to understand, most modern English versions, like the NIV, anticipate the verb by taking it from verse 3 and inserting it in verse 1. Many other versions try to divide up the long opening into more manageable units.

What does all that mean? It means, clearly then, to John, **the theme** is more important than the telling; that’s why he places the theme **first** ... for emphasis. But just what is this **Word of life**, which was there **from the beginning**? The phrase echoes the start of the Gospel of John, **John 1:1**, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* And beyond that to the very first verse of the Bible in **Genesis 1:1**, *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”*

Go back as far as you will in your imagination, says Genesis, before anything that exists came into being, and you will find God, the eternal Being.

Go back to that same point, says John in his gospel, and you will find Jesus Christ with God, because He was God, before anything was created.

John’s concern in the letter is to declare that the Word, which was made flesh, was the same eternal Son of the Father who was before all time and who was the agent of all creation. The Word of life did not merely come into existence at Bethlehem; He already existed from the very beginning **with the Father** (verse 2). It was this everlasting Word that became the human Jesus. There can be no separation between the two. That’s why we often call Christ **“the Living Word”** and we call the Bible **“the written Word.”**

What does all this mean?

Simply put, John wants you to understand that the message **“the word of life”** is realized only in the person who is **“the word of life.”** In other words, the message of Christ cannot be understood apart from Christ Himself.

Look how John explains this ...

First, he says, **which we have heard**. The **“we”** here are the apostles ... witnesses and messengers of Christ. They have heard a message from a messenger. Except in this case, Jesus

² The Exposition of the text is adapted from the sermon *“God Became Touchable,”* by Ray Ortlund, Jr., Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN, 12/10/06; *Notes for the Study & Exposition of 1st John* by Eric Kress, pages 17-21; *The Message of John’s Letters* by David Jackman, pages 19ff.

is both the Messenger and the Message. This was something that happened and was still having an impact in John's life.

Second, he says, *which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon*. John physically saw the events we read of in the Gospels with his own eyes. He personally saw God incarnate — Jesus Christ. John is declaring his eyewitness testimony to combat those who were claiming that Jesus was divine, but not human. Many years have passed since Christ and over that time, John has carefully examined the life, person, words, and works of Jesus. He saw Him when He was hanging naked on a cross, suffering for sin. And he saw Him when He was resurrected from the dead, and he saw Him ascend to heaven.

He is the last eyewitness.

And not only did he see him, finally, he says, *and have touched with our hands*. He touched Jesus the man, he ate of the bread and handled the cup, he leaned on Him during the last supper. He wants them, and us, to know that ...

v. 2: THE PERSON IS REAL³

“... the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—“

Twice in this verse, John says, *“the life was made manifest.”* The life of God — Jesus Christ — was **manifested**, or made known, made visible, made clear. This eternal second Person of the Trinity is the Life who became flesh and dwelt among us as a man.

The great theologian, B.B. Warfield, wrote about this, “The glory of the incarnation is that it presents to our adoring gaze not a humanized God or a deified man; but a true God-man — one who is all that God is and at the same time all that man is (yet without sin); one on whose almighty arm we can rest, and to whose human sympathy we can appeal.”

Furthermore, John says that Jesus *“was with the Father.”* Again, John wants us to know that Jesus was both God and man. The Greek grammar used here suggests that Jesus, as God the Son, was continuously existing in an intimate, face to face relationship with God the Father — before, during, and after the incarnation. Jesus has existed eternally with the Father.

John is saying, and wants us to know beyond a shadow of a doubt, that “The Person on whom hangs all of Christianity, Jesus Christ, the eternal one, is real. I testify to it. It's my business to proclaim it.”

Now that John's stated the message is real and the Person is real, he gets on with the purpose of his letter, which is that ...

v. 3: THE FELLOWSHIP IS REAL

“...that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

The word translated “fellowship” here is *koinōnia* ... and it means participation, partaking, partnership ... and all those words are used in translating it. In **Luke 5:10**, James, John, and Peter were said to be “**partners**” (using the same word) in the fishing business. In **2 Peter 1:4**, it says that Christians have become “**partakers**” (same word again) of the divine nature, meaning that we get to participate in a personal relationship with God Himself. This concept of fellowship forms the basis for the argument of the rest of the book. True Christians manifest the character of God with whom they have **real fellowship**.

How? Through faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

³ B. B. Warfield quote is taken from *Benjamin B. Warfield, Selected Shorter Writings*, John Meeter, ed., page 166.

Not only do we have fellowship, but John says, “*fellowship with us,*” those who have truly placed our faith in Christ, and therefore, also have the same kind of fellowship that we have with God ... he says, “*and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.*” And that’s pretty much what Jesus Himself told us in **John 17:3**, “*And this is eternal life, that they know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*”

So John is encouraging us with these words — that the message about Christ is real, the person of Christ is real, and our fellowship with Christ is real. And because all that is true, then ...

v. 4: **THE JOY IS REAL**

“*And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.*”

John comes to the obvious conclusion, that if the Gospel is true and Christ is real and the fellowship is genuine, then the joy is real as well. This isn’t a forced joyfulness, but a real, deep-down, smiling-on-the-inside, authentic joy. John knew that the consummation of his joy, the ultimate goal and fulfillment of his joy, would come from sharing this good news of the reality of Jesus with his friends, with his beloved children in the faith.

In fact, near the end of these letters, we read, **3 John 1:4**, “*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*”

CONCLUSION: No Close Friend?⁴

Two years ago, *USA TODAY* reported a study, which found that 25 percent of Americans have no friend to confide in, not even one close friend. As recently as 1985, the Americans with no close friends were about 10 percent. Now it's around 25 percent, according to this study at the University of Chicago.

More people are lonely than ever before, and I wonder how many of us here this morning feel isolated, even in a crowd.

Remember the song “*Eleanor Rigby*” by the Beatles? It had these weird lyrics, “*Eleanor Rigby, wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door.*”

Eleanor is leaving the privacy of her home. She stops at the door, where there's a jar holding her best public face, she puts it on and walks out. We all understand that. But **why** do we falsify ourselves? It only deepens our isolation. The gospel explains why. Ever since Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we've been **hiding from God**.

Christ came down from heaven out of compassion for people like us. He came down to lure us out of hiding and persuade us that we have a Friend in Him. He came down, as one of us, to bring us **back to God**.

That's what John's talking about here. 2000 years ago God took on human nature in the birth of Jesus. He moved among us our best Friend. He is real, his message is real, his fellowship with us is real, and the joy that brings us is real.

Therefore, we have some questions to answer.

1. **Are you still hiding?** Jesus wants to have fellowship with you. The last thing He wants you to do is hide from Him, or remain isolated from Him, or try to pretend to be someone or something other than what you really are — a sinner who desperately needs a Savior.
2. **Do you believe Him?** The message of Christ is true. The grace of Christ is real. Do you believe what He says? Do you believe what He promises? In a few moments, during communion, we're going to profess our faith together using an old creed. But you know

⁴ Janet Kornblum, "Study: 25% of Americans have no one to confide in," *USA TODAY*, 6/23/06, page 1A.

what you need to believe to say it, don't you? Do you believe that God the Son came from heaven, took on human form, and died to pay the penalty for the sin by which we've offended a holy God. He rose from the grave three days later victorious over death and is now exalted at the right hand of the Father in heaven. At some point, you either believe that or you don't.

3. **Do you live like it?** Are you growing in faith, are you growing in holiness, are you growing in love? At the beginning of this message, I said that the way to tell if someone is a **false teacher** is by looking at his life and teaching to see if he is a man of faith, if he is a man of holiness, and if he is a man of love. That applies to all people ... every man, woman, and child. Do the words faith, holiness, and love describe my life?

My guess is that none of us here this morning thinks that those words describe us ... **enough**. That in each one of those areas — **faith** (what we really believe), **holiness** (how we really live), and **love** (how we really relate to each other) — we could all be doing **way better** than we are. Amen?

John is writing to make sure that you don't merely **profess** the faith, but that you actually **possess** the faith.

And he wants you to be able to tell the difference.

You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

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