

Lesson 1 – 1 John 1:1-4

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Introduction to 1 John

Author

Leaders in the early church assumed that John the apostle, author of The Gospel of John, also wrote these three letters even though he never identified himself by name. Though it is generally agreed that the same person wrote them all (vocabulary, style, and emphasis are identical), some feel they were not written by John the apostle, son of Zebedee, but by another John, an elder or overseer of the early church. The argument for the apostle John, however, is stronger and answers the objections. Every evidence, internal and external, points to John the elder being the same person as John the apostle, and the author of all four unnamed books (the Gospel of John and his three epistles) as well as Revelation.

There are several Johns in the New Testament. The disciples John and James were brothers, the sons of Zebedee (Matthew 4:21-23; Acts 12:2). They were fishermen before Jesus called him to leave their nets and follow Him.

²¹Going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the *son* of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them.

²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him. (Matthew 4:21-23)

Jesus named them “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17).

¹⁷and James, the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James (to them He gave the name Boanerges, which means, “Sons of Thunder”); (Mark 3:17)

John was impulsive, proud, and aggressive. He had a significant right/wrong mentality. This is significant since at the end of his life he is called the disciple of love.

³⁵James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Jesus, saying, “Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You.” ³⁶And He said to them, “What do you want Me to do for you?” ³⁷They said to Him, “Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on *Your* left, in Your glory.” (Mark 10:35-37)

⁵¹When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem; ⁵²and He sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for Him. ⁵³But they did not receive Him, because He was traveling toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When His disciples James and John saw *this*, they said, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (Luke 9:51-54)

John was one of the three most intimate associates of Jesus along with Peter and James (cf. Matthew 17:1; 26:37). He was an eyewitness to and participant in Jesus’ earthly ministry (1 John 1:1-4).

¹⁷Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. (Matthew 17:1)

³⁷And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. (Matthew 26:37)

After the ascension, John became a “pillar” in the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:9). He ministered with Peter (Acts 3:1; 4:13; 8:14) until he went to Ephesus (tradition says before the destruction of Jerusalem) from where he wrote his gospel. He was later exiled from Ephesus to Patmos (Revelation 1:9) by the Romans.

⁹and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (Galatians 2:9)

¹³Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13)

¹⁴Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, (Acts 8:14)

As the last remaining apostle, John’s voice was powerful and important to the first century church. Papias, an early church Father who had direct contact with John, described him as a “living and abiding voice” who was active in the church even though he was very old. He was the only man left alive who had firsthand experiential knowledge of Jesus. He was an eyewitness to the ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and apostolic work of the Lord.

Date

Since there are no clear historical references in the letter, no precise date is possible. Writings by a multitude of historians and church Fathers indicate that John spent a significant part of his advanced years in Ephesus ministering widely, overseeing many churches, and conducting an extensive writing ministry (canonically his gospel and 1-3 John). Church records place their writing in the latter part of the first century. They were most likely written soon after the Gospel and before the persecution under Dalmatian in AD 95 since that event is not mentioned. Considering these factors, it is reasonable to date the epistle AD 90-95.

Recipients

John does not mention his readers by name which suggests it was a circular letter to be read in multiple churches; perhaps the churches in Asia Minor (western Turkey) where Ephesus was located. The word usage and content indicate it is written to believers. Additionally, no Old Testament quotations indicates it is written to gentiles, or largely gentile, congregations.

Theme

1 John is written to believers in order to present tests to determine if true saving faith has been exercised so that we may know that we have eternal life.

¹³These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:13)

While presenting these tests, John also address joy, sin, and protection from deceivers.

⁴These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. (1 John 1:4)

¹My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; (1 John 2:1)

²⁶These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you. (1 John 2:26)

Woven into these tests is John's attack on Gnosticism which emphasized a special knowledge (gnosis), denied the deity and saving work of Jesus, and resulted in immoral lifestyles.

Structure

The structure of the epistle is a source of considerable scholarship. Ideas range from plan-less, to dual structure (God is light/God is love or fellowship/sonship), to a spiral structure. We will study through 1 John with a spiral outline.

There are four spirals laying out doctrinal and conduct tests of true regeneration, true salvation, evidence of true saving faith. A true believer, one who has exercised the gift of saving faith, will be changed and that change will be evident/manifest. Each spiral starts with a doctrinal test then presents conduct tests. Each spiral has similar topics that are expanded on and reiterated in each spiral.

Outline/Study Plan

- I. Introduction – Christ is the way of fellowship (1:1-4) (Lesson 1)
- II. Evidence of true saving faith – Spiral 1 (1:5-2:17)
 - A. Doctrine – Hold fast to truth – The way of salvation from sin (1:5-2:2) (Lesson 2)
 - B. Conduct – Obedience (2:3-6) (Lesson 3)
 - C. Conduct – Love (2:7-11) (Lesson 4)
 - D. Conduct – Sin (Don't love the world) (2:12-17) (Lesson 5)
- III. Evidence of true saving faith – Spiral 2 (2:18-3:24)
 - A. Doctrine – Hold fast to truth – Reject false teachers (2:18-27) (Lesson 6)
 - B. Conduct – Christ's coming is a purifying fixed hope (2:28-3:3) (Lesson 7)
 - C. Conduct – Sin/obedience (3:4-10) (Lesson 8)
 - D. Conduct – Love (3:11-18) (Lesson 9)
 - E. Conduct – A conviction-free walk (3:19-24) (Lesson 10)
- IV. Evidence of true saving faith – Spiral 3 (4:1-21)
 - A. Doctrine – Hold fast to truth – Reject false teachers (4:1-6) (Lesson 11)
 - B. Conduct – Love (4:7-21) (Lesson 12)
 - C. Conduct – Obedience (5:1-5) (Lesson 13)
- V. Evidence of true saving faith – Spiral 4 (5:6-21)
 - A. Doctrine – Hold fast to truth – Christ is the way of salvation (5:6-12) (Lesson 14)
 - B. Conduct – Confidences (5:13-20) (Lesson 15)
- VI. Conclusion (5:21) (Lesson 16)

Introduction – Christ is the way of fellowship (1:1-4)

While this section is often referred to as the “prologue” or “introduction” in many outlines, it also serves as the first doctrinal test – a biblical view of Christ. This passage in the Greek is one long sentence, with a parenthetical (v2). The main verb is “proclaim” in verse 3. That is important because everything else is the subject, object, or modifier of “proclaim”.

1. Experiencing and Proclaiming Christ (1:1-3a)

¹What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—
²and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—³what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also,

¹That 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—²the 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—^{3a}that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you (ESV)

John starts his epistle by declaring the experience of the eyewitnesses of Christ's earthly ministry. This is the direct, personal experience of the eyewitnesses which refutes the Gnostic idea that Christ did not come in the flesh. While our experience is different than those eyewitnesses, all who have surrendered their life to Christ, have experienced Him.

❖ In what ways have you experienced the living Christ?

“What was from the beginning...” There are two main interpretations by conservative scholars of what John means by “beginning”: from the beginning of the gospel message or from eternity past. While John, in his gospel, begins with the eternality of Christ (John 1:1), it seems here that “beginning” is related to being able to hear, see, behold, and touch. The same verb and usage are used in John 1:14 as here in 1 John 1:1 – “saw” in John 1:14 and “have looked at” in 1 John 1:1 – both related to the incarnation.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we **saw** His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

Peter speaking to the brethren after the ascension, but before Pentecost noted the special place of eyewitnesses from the time of Jesus' baptism to the ascension. And Mark viewed the beginning of the gospel as Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:1).

²¹Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—²²beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these *must* become a witness with us of His resurrection.” (Acts 1:21-22)

Context determines meaning. The idea of beginning not being from eternity is consistent with other usage in the epistle.

²⁴As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard **from the beginning** abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. (1 John 2:24)

¹¹For this is the message which you have heard **from the beginning**, that we should love one another; (1 John 3:11)

The false teaching that John is, in part, writing to refute and strengthen the believers against is the denial that Jesus came in the flesh (1 John 4:2). Altogether then, “beginning” here most likely refers to the beginning of the gospel message.

This also implies that what was from the beginning has not changed. The gospel message has not changed to meet changing cultural norms. It stands resolute in the proclamation of sin, judgement, grace, Christ’s person and work, and the meaning of true saving faith – all of which are clearly declared in Scripture. It has been once for all handed down to the saints (Jude 1:3). It is the only message that saves and begins the process of sanctification.

❖ **Do you believe and present a pure gospel message?**

Throughout the epistle, John uses pronouns without declared antecedents, requiring careful interpretation. In this passage, verses 1-4, there seems to be a delineation in verses 1-3a and 3b regarding the pronoun antecedents. John may have used “we” editorially to represent himself personally. It is more likely, however, that “we” refers to John and others who had heard, seen, beheld, and touched something. These are eyewitnesses. “You” refers to the readers of the letter and by extension believers who are reading the epistle. Later, we will look at “us” and “our” in verse 1:3b.

❖ **Do you view yourself as an ever-growing group of the redeemed who have experienced Christ?**

“Heard” means to hear with understanding and often refers to a hearing that results in a conviction of the mind that moves a person to submit/obey. The usage (perfect tense) speaks of an abiding effect, like a “ringing in one’s ears”.

“Seen with our eyes” means to see, to experience, to discern clearly. Again, the usage (perfect tense) speaks of an abiding effect, like “burned into one’s mind”. “With our eyes” emphasizes the reality of Christ’s humanness.

“Looked at” comes from the root word “to wonder” and means a calm, intentional, continuous, contemplative gaze until something has been grasped of the significance of that person or thing being beheld. The 1977 NASB translates this “beheld” trying to capture the nuance and difference with “seen”. The usage (aorist) speaks of the witnesses having grasped the significance of Christ as historical fact.

“Touched with our hands” means to feel or grope about so as to feel something; the searching, exploring use of the hands that tests by handling. Again, the usage (aorist) speaks of the witnesses having tested the humanity of Christ by the closest of contact and it is historical fact.

“Word of Life” is John’s reference to Christ. In his gospel, he refers to Christ as “the Word” (John 1:1, 14). “Word” means thought or expression of the mind in words. Christ is the “image (or mirror like representation) of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 4:3-4), the “the radiance of God’s glory”, the “exact representation” of God (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus is the exact likeness of God, a mirror image. He is God incarnate.

John adds “of life”. Christ Himself is self-existent and is the giver of meaningful, joyful, eternal life. No one or nothing else gives life eternal.

⁴In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. (John 1:4)

²⁶For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; (John 5:26)

²⁵Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, (John 11:25)

⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. (John 14:6)

¹¹And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. ¹²He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. (1 John 5:11-12)

❖ **It is obvious that you cannot go anywhere else for salvation, but in practice do you go elsewhere for meaning and joy?**

John now gives a parenthetical regarding the “Word of Life”. The “and” which starts verse two could also be translated “indeed”.

“Manifested” means to bring to light or to cause to become visible. The “life” which was manifested is clearly Christ. The manifestation does not stop with the deity and humanity of Christ. In the epistle’s context, it must also mean that meaningful, joyful, eternal life (i.e., connectedness or “fellowship” with God or union with Christ) was objectively made known in Christ. The perfect born-again life, that which we strive for in the sanctifying power of the Spirit, is seen in Christ.

❖ **Are you striving in the power of the Spirit to be like Christ?**

The eye witnesses “testify” (to give evidence, give testimony, bear record, to affirm that one has seen or heard or experienced) and “proclaim” (report, relate, inform, tell openly from the authentic source what has occurred) the manifested life. Both “testify” and “proclaim” are in the present tense indicating that the eyewitnesses had made testifying and proclaiming a way of life – not just in words but in lifestyle as their life displayed the life of Christ.

❖ **Is your life proclaiming the living Christ?**

John and his fellow eyewitnesses are not just proclaiming an unchanging gospel message, but the Word of Life Himself. They are testifying to and proclaiming literally “the life, the eternal”. If there is any doubt about the Word of Life being only that which is manifested in the flesh, John answers that here. Christ is life; He is also eternal. He was with the Father as the second person of the Godhead in eternity past and at a point in time manifested Himself incarnate to the eyewitnesses.

Some 60 years after the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, the last living disciple/apostle of Christ, one of the three disciples in Christ's inner circle, the "disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7; 21:20) stood as an abiding witness of the deity and humanity of Christ against all who would speak heresy against Him. Christ, God incarnate, the possessor and giver of life was revealed and He was historically validated by the eyewitnesses from far and near, both before and after the resurrection.

You probably think that John and the other eyewitnesses were blessed to spend three years with God incarnate. But Jesus views you as blessed because you believe through the work of God in your heart, the gift of faith, and the message handed down from the eyewitnesses preserved in the Scriptures.

²⁹Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? **Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.**" (John 20:29)

⁸and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, (1 Peter 1:8)

❖ **Are you striving to see others blessed to hear of the eyewitness's testimony backed by your life testimony?**

2. Fellowship – Purpose of Proclamation (1:3b-4)

^{3b}so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. ⁴These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

^{3b}so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (ESV)

The purpose of proclaiming the testimony concerning the eternal Word of Life is to have fellowship: believer-to-believer and child-to-Father and Son. The implication in "have" is a continual state of fellowship.

"Fellowship" means to share in common, to have communion, be in partnership or togetherness. It is the joint, active participation or sharing in what one has in common with others. Fellowship does not refer to social gatherings among church members. It is a connectedness based on another common connectedness, that is Christ.

A difficulty of interpretation develops here because of the common thought that "fellowship" is a post-salvation concept. However, John here is using the word as synonymous with "union". Union is through the baptizing work of the Spirit at salvation.

John wants his readers to have fellowship with himself along with the eyewitnesses ("us"). Believers are united through spiritual baptism with one another in the body of Christ.

¹³For **by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body**, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:13)

Scripture gives believers many commands that have been termed the “one-another’s” because they are commands directed at the relationship between believers. These are the “put-ons” of fellowship. They describe how believers are to interact with and treat other believers based on their family, fellowship relationship. Here is a partial list:

- Love one another (John 15:12; 3:16; 13:34-35; 1 John 4:11-12; 1 Peter 4:8)
- Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12-13; Matthew 18:21-22)
- Buildup/edify one another (Romans 14:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; Ephesians 4:29)
- Give preference to one another (Philippians 2:3-4; Romans 12:10)
- Encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 3:13; 10:24-25)
- Admonish one another (Romans 15:14)
- Serve one another (Galatians 5:13; 1 Peter 4:10)
- Be devoted to one another (Romans 12:10)
- Be affectionate to one another (1 Peter 5:14)
- Be hospitable to one another (1 Peter 4:9)
- Confess sins to and pray for one another (James 5:16)
- Bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2)
- Comfort one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18)
- Live harmoniously with one another (Romans 15:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:13)
- Show tolerance for one another (Ephesians 4:2)
- Be kind to one another (Ephesians 4:32)

❖ **Do you view the body as a community sharing a common purpose and direction?**

All believers have fellowship with one another because every believer has had a saving encounter with Christ. Fellowship must start with a relationship with Christ. Believers are united with Christ through the baptizing work of the Spirit. Those who were baptized into Christ (baptism of the Spirit) are also united with Him.

³Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection, (Romans 6:3-5)

Union with Christ is the believers only complete adequacy. You are fully and completely dependent on Christ for salvation and sanctification. You are in union with Christ and your life is supernatural because you have access to the Spirit.

John wants to ensure that his readers are in fellowship with himself and other believers and in fellowship with the Father and Son. This passage indicates that believers have fellowship vertically with God through “His Son Christ Jesus” and also horizontally with other one another. The “vertical fellowship” makes possible the “horizontal fellowship”.

❖ **When fellowshiping with the brethren do you focus on your vertical relationship with God first?**

Finally, John gives a reason for writing his letter, “so that our joy may be made complete”.

“These things” could mean those written in the first four verses or those things he writes in the entire epistle. “I am writing” bookends the epistle so it seems to make sense to view “these things” as the entire epistle.

“Our” is a textual variant that the ESV notes that some manuscripts read “your”, yet “our” is believed to be the most accurate. Here John includes the readers with the eyewitnesses in “our”. Fellowship with the Father and Son brings joy.

“Joy” is the deep-down sense of well-being that abides in the heart of the person who is filled with the Spirit and knows all is well between himself and the Lord. It derives from spiritual realities and so is not an experience that comes from favorable circumstances, but even occurs when those circumstances are the most painful. It is grace dependent and circumstance independent. It is the feeling of inner blessedness or gladness of heart at knowing God's favor.

“Complete” is the word for “filled up” or “fullness”. It means to be filled to the brim, to make complete in every particular, to cause to abound, to furnish or supply liberally, to flood, to diffuse throughout, to pervade, to take possession of and so to ultimately control. It is the same word used for “be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). The usage can literally be rendered “having been filled completely full in times past, may persist in that state of fullness through the present time”.

¹¹You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is **fullness** (*LXX same word*) of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever. (Psalm 16:11)

The only way for joy to be made complete is in Christ and through Christ.

¹¹These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy **may be made full**. (John 15:11)

²²But **the fruit of the Spirit is** love, **joy**, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23)

❖ **Is your life characterized by joy, if not, why?**

Conclusion

John is writing as an apostolic witness of the humanity and deity of Christ. He addresses the fallacies that fellowship (union) with God can occur without Christ and that fellowship (union) among the redeemed can occur without Christ. John wants his readers (and us) to make sure we have fellowship with the Father and the Son and thereby have fellowship with one another.

Additional Study

1. Each time you come to the Scriptures, pray for the Spirit to give you understanding.
2. Read 1 John once this week a chapter at a time (one chapter a day for five days).
3. Re-read today's passage. Note repeated words and ask yourself what John is trying to convey.
4. Re-read the notes from today and contemplate the thought questions.
5. Pray that God would show you personal applications from this passage.