

# The Real Story of the Real Savior

## 1 John 1:1-4

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It was 19 years ago now that God did a transformation in my life. I had served for a year as a youth pastor at a church in Indianapolis. The kids were mostly uninterested. I had a few who were hostile. In spite of my efforts, things were in pretty rough shape. I went to the senior pastor one day and said, "I don't know what to do. These kids don't really care and my messages don't seem to get through." He looked at me and asked about those messages. I described what I did generally and frankly, I mostly winged it with them on subjects I thought they might like.

He challenged me to teach them the Bible with the same care and concern I would if I was teaching adults. He said words that the Holy Spirit used to pierce my heart, "What if David would have said, 'Oh these few small sheep.'?"

I left that meeting a changed man and I began to actually teach the Bible to the kids and God did some wonderful things. The very first expository series I ever taught coming out of that change was 1 John. It has been special to me ever since.

### Introduction to 1 John

#### Who wrote it?

Unlike most other New Testament books, the author doesn't identify himself. In this case, it is easily identified as the apostle John. His language and style are very similar to the gospel of John. Early church fathers identify it with John.

Which New Testament John wrote it? There are a few men named John—John the Baptist and John Mark included. This is John the disciple, the son of Zebedee, the brother of James, the same John who wrote the gospel of John, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation. He is John the "beloved disciple" who famously was so close to Jesus that he reclined in the Upper Room resting his head on Jesus.

John was apparently the youngest apostle and outlived all the other apostles, living into the 90s AD. He served as pastor of the church at Ephesus, where Timothy also had pastored. He was banished to the island of Patmos by the Roman emperor Domitian. There he received the vision we call the book of *Revelation*. He later returned to Ephesus and died there. It was during this last stint at Ephesus that he wrote 1 John.

#### Why did he write it?

This little letter of five chapters and 105 verses is the clearest teaching in the Bible concerning evidences of genuine Christian salvation. This is a subject near and dear to me as this was a huge struggle for me in years past. How can I know that I am saved? John wrote to what I will call the Johannine community with the same goal but for a different reason. There seems to have been an early heresy developing that reduced Christianity to mere knowledge and mysticism. It separated "Christ" and Jesus. Scholars try to put this together from the early church father manuscripts and there is some fuzziness. Here's what we know. There was a group that left the church which John addresses. If we can assume

that 1 John addresses the issues surrounding their leaving, then the issues he addresses relate to the false teaching of this schismatic group.

It is disputed, but a story from history that may be true relates to a known teacher of this opposition group named Cerinthus. One day the Apostle John went into a building to bathe in Ephesus and saw Cerinthus there. He immediately ran out saying, "Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within." Rather than saying we should never use a bathroom with a heretic inside, the story does echo 1 John's grave concern with false teaching. It's something we would do well to learn from in our day where we try and play nice with everyone.

The style of the letter is described like a musical symphony. A symphony will typically have a few melody lines that it repeats and goes back to, then leaves, and then comes back to. John does not write like Paul. Paul is very logical and linear. John is more circular. The letter is compared to a fireside chat with the Apostle John. I think that is helpful. He doesn't write a treatise on assurance; he chats and meanders but always comes back to three main tests of assurance: *a moral test*—do you obey? *A doctrinal test*—do you believe? *And a social test*—do you love? These are the indicators of real salvation—not an experience; not a heritage; not what people say. In fact, he will dismiss over and over what people say. John says that *if you talk the talk, you've got to walk the walk*. Yet all of it is graced with love and understanding that we are works in progress, not perfection.

The key verse summarizes why John wrote it, *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.* (1 John 5:13)

I hope the fruit of this series is that every genuine Christian here is solidly assured of their salvation and every non-Christian is shaken up and embraces the real gospel and displays real evidences of genuine salvation.

*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 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—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. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.* (1 John 1:1-4)

That should sound vaguely familiar since he begins his gospel with similar language. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.* (John 1:1-2)

Both his gospel and his letter begin with doctrine. What doctrine? Notice that he doesn't begin with a doctrine of the church or the Christian life or creation. Both begin with the person and work of Christ and the reason is that Jesus is the fulcrum upon which everything else rests. The whole of the Christian faith balances upon this one question, *who was Jesus?* Was he God actually? Was he actually a man? If either aspect were to be proven false or simply slightly altered, the entirety of Christianity's claim as the one true way to God crumbles.

This is why Cerinthus and the early Gnostics were such a grave threat. If their teaching won the hearts of the people and if Jesus and Christ were separated, then the gospel John and the other apostles proclaimed would disintegrate and the church wouldn't be here today.

So John begins with doctrine and if you are the organizational type, we can discern John explaining this by giving us the highlights of the Jesus story. If you watch ESPN in the morning, he does what ESPN does with last night's game. There was a lot to the game, but they only show the moments that defined the game. A goal line stand. A fumble recovery. The winning touchdown. Everyone understands there was more to it, but those are the highlights. John does the same. *From the beginning*—the eternity and pre-existence of Jesus. *The life was made manifest*—the incarnation of Jesus. *We proclaim to you*—the era of the church and gospel, and restored spiritual fellowship with God. *Joy complete*—future eternity. Let's walk through the text.

## John's Highlights

### Eternality of Jesus (Verse 1)

He begins with "*that which was from the beginning.*" The Grammarians here will point out that the relative pronoun "which" applies to a thing not a person. We would expect "who" or at least "Word" like John 1:1. In fact, the whole series of clauses here are "whiches" instead of "whos." Why? John is drawing attention both to the person of Christ and the message of Christ. He is the Word of Life. It makes for slightly awkward reading but he is correcting the Gnostics who tried to separate the man from the message. John brings them together as the gospel is both a person (Christ) and a proclamation (gospel). *That which.*

*From the beginning* hearkens to the first words of the Bible, *in the beginning*. This doesn't mean there was a beginning to God, but that before there was a beginning of time, there was God. God pre-existed the beginning and was there before time began in creation.

What must this mean? If Jesus was there before God created the cosmos, he must be God. John begins with the eternal deity of Christ. How can Jesus be with God prior to creation? In verse 3 he explains, *with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ*. God is both one and three. One God. Three persons. God is a tri-unity and Jesus as the Son of God was with God and was God. (John 1:1).

John begins by saying, *Listen folks, Jesus is God*. That's a good place to start a letter, don't you think? He doesn't start with, "Hello, how are you doing?" or "Hi, this is John, you know, the beloved disciple." Just, *Jesus is God*.

### Incarnation of Jesus (Verses 1-2)

*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 life was made manifest..*

This is the power of personal testimony. John was an insider and an eyewitness. He was one of 12 hand-picked disciples. He saw Jesus up close. This describes this relationship as hearing, seeing and looking upon with eyes, and touching with hands. What does this sound like? It sounds like an eyewitness report. If you watch one of the crime-solving shows on TV, you know how this works. The show begins with a crime, like a bank heist or violent home robbery. It shows it happening but you can't see faces and you don't know who did it. The show follows the detectives investigating the clues. They begin by interviewing the witnesses. What did you see? What did you hear? What did you feel? John walks through these as a personal witness, not to solve a crime but to rebuff the teaching of the Gnostics that said Jesus was not truly a man in flesh. John says, *I was with him. I heard. I saw. I touched.*

John was a witness of the incarnation of Jesus. Literally, “the coming into flesh.” He says in his gospel, *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.* (John 1:14). This is so critical because only a man could die for men as our representative.

So within two verses, he has established by personal testimony, the deity of Jesus and the humanity of Jesus. He was the God-man.

### **Proclamation of Jesus (Verse 3)**

*That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you.*

This proclaiming began at Jesus’ ascension. Jesus told the disciples, *You shall be my witnesses.* The book of Acts tells the beginning of this proclamation. It has been going on for a long time. In fact, this is what we are doing right now. Proclaiming Jesus just as the apostles did and the early church fathers. 2,000 years of proclamation. The age of the church is awaiting the return of our Savior and final judgment.

### **Fellowship with God and other believers (Verse 3)**

*We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.*

You may think this is all a bunch of theological mumbo jumbo for theologians and philosophers to muddle their way through until you get to verse 3 and John says that Jesus provides something which all of us desperately want—fellowship with God the Father and his Son Jesus.

That word *fellowship* is an important New Testament truth. The word was used in the common language to describe partners in business or joint owners of a property. The root of the word means “common” or to share something in common. It is a relationship word. When applied to what John says here, it is a most profound truth and opportunity. In verse 1 Jesus is called “The Word of Life.” In verse 2 he is the life made “manifest” and he is “eternal life.” Don’t let the words here overwhelm you. You can get this.

*Life* describes in the most general way the spiritual experience that all of us so desperately want. It is the pursuit of all the religions of the world. It is the worship impulse God placed within every human heart. Physical death is the grisly reminder of our spiritual death and what we feel inwardly. We are dead. We are lost. We are empty. We are searching. We are broken. What do we want? We want to live! We want that inward spiritual life. We want vibrancy and the biggest thing we want is we want the God our souls were made for. Jesus is the source of that life and the giver of the very life of God to all who believe in him.

It’s like our local utility NIPSCO. Think of what’s coming. Winter. Nasty weather. Ice and sleet and snow. What happens when the big storm hits? Wires go down. No electricity. Suddenly everything is electrically dead. Who do we call? NIPSCO! Come and save us from the cold! NIPSCO can make electricity available, but for our homes and lights to come alive again, they have to be connected to the source of the electricity. When we are connected to NIPSCO, not only are we electrically alive but we are in constant electrical fellowship with NIPSCO and indirectly, in electrical communion with everyone else who is in electrical fellowship with NIPSCO.

Do you see what John is saying? Jesus as God is the source of all life. Man’s sin in the garden began a spiritual winter for all mankind; all our wires were disconnected from God.

Without connection to God, there's no spiritual life. There's no peace. There's nothing ultimately meaningful. Do we all want it? Yes. So much so that we settle for cheap substitutes thinking they will give us real life. Sex makes us feel good, and money makes us feel safe, and success makes us feel important, and health makes us feel eternal, but all of them are fleeting.

To be spiritually alive we must be connected to God through Christ. *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* (John 14:6) Faith in Jesus as Savior is the connection between us and the life of God. When we connect by faith, we actually participate, not electrically, but spiritually in the very life of God, a life that must be eternal because God is eternal.

I don't have to know you to know that this is what you want. And only Jesus provides the life of God in the soul of man, begun by the Spirit through faith in Jesus and his saving work on our behalf on the cross—a connection with the very life of God that cannot and will not end.

### **Joy in and with Jesus (Verse 4)**

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

Because of a textual variant it is impossible to know if it is properly translated "our joy" or "your joy" but here's what we know; we know when our joy will be complete. *These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.* (John 15:11)

Christianity is and must be a faith experienced with joy. We don't always have feelings of happiness as anyone who has been a Christian for anytime will testify. Still, even in the pain, there is joy in knowing the God-man Word and source of eternal life, Jesus.

*"Clearly this joy is inseparable from the salvation that is present in the Son, but it is directly bound up with the person of the Son, who is himself present in the fellowship. Joy is a gift of the Father, even as the Son is a gift of the Father, and is present wherever the fellowship truly appears."* (Barker, p. 308)

John begins his fireside chat of a letter with a bold statement of who Christ is as well as a summary of the story. From the beginning, Jesus is God. We have seen, heard and touched him. Jesus is man. This Word of life we proclaim so that you may fellowship with God and experience spiritual life with everyone else connected to him for our eternal joy.

*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.* (1 John 5:13)

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