

I Met Jesus: John

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Steve DeWitt

Our teaching series, *I Met Jesus*, is nearly over. We have this week and then a wrap-up next week. Today we look at our last person from the Gospel of John, and it is none other than the author of the gospel himself – John. Which John was he? In biblical times, children were named differently than the current trend. Most often they were named after a family member. You may remember when Zechariah wrote that his son would be named John as the angel told him, people were perplexed because there was no one in their family by that name (Luke 1:61). They had a shorter list of potential names. This is why there are so many different biblical characters with the same name. Take Mary for example: Jesus' mother Mary; Mary, the sister of Martha; Mary called Magdalene. There were other Marys.

The trend these days is to name your child a name with a spelling that no other child in the history of the human race has ever had or ever will have. What ever happened to Bob or Tom or Jane? They are simple and easy to remember.

John was a common name like that. There were many different men in the New Testament named John. John the Baptist. The writer of the Gospel of Mark was actually named John Mark. The John we are talking about here is the disciple John, the brother of James. They were known as "the sons of Zebedee." This is the writer of the Gospel of John; 1, 2 & 3 John; and Revelation. Only Luke and Paul wrote more of the New Testament. He is called "The Beloved Disciple" or "The Apostle of Love." Like many of the others we've met in this series, the back story of John is pretty shocking when you consider what his reputation is today. So let's go back into John's life. I think you will see what I mean. I am breaking down John's life into two parts. *Old John* and *New John*. Something very drastic happened to turn him into the Apostle and hero we know him to be.

Background on John

He was from a fishing town and a fishing family

He was born and grew up in the town of Bethsaida (see map on top of next page). Bethsaida means "house of fish." It was a fishing village on the northeast side of the Sea of Galilee. It was also the hometown of Peter, James, Andrew, and Phillip. Nearly half of all Jesus' disciples were from Bethsaida.

John was the son of Zebedee and grew up with his brother James who also became a disciple. They grew up in a blue collar-type home and their trade was fishing. This was the commercial fishing of the day. They fished with small boats and nets. It was physical work and involved throwing nets and rowing boats and they needed strong arms to pull in the nets in laden with fish. This was their family business. It was all they knew.



He was young and seeking spiritual answers

One reality often missed is that some of our heroes were young. Jesus was young; he was only 30 when he started his public ministry. Whether that seems young to you depends which side of 30 you are on. John was even younger. We know this because history tells us he lived into the 90s AD, around 60 years after the death of Jesus. This makes John during the time of Jesus likely in his early 20s, maybe even late teens. Do you picture the disciple John as a college-age student?

One thing he very much had in common with that age group was that he was pursuing spiritual answers to life. He was more than a fisherman; he was a human being and he shared his hunger for spiritual things with all humans. This led him to seek answers first from John the Baptist.

John was first a disciple of John the Baptist (John 1:36-37)

John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing and huge numbers of people were going to him in the wilderness. John was one of them. Like many young people, he was seeking the truth. His soul told him life was more than pulling fish into a boat. He recognized a spiritual need.

Young people are still the same. This may be you here today. It's a different age from what John lived in. You are likely able to text as fast as you talk, you're very careful to dress like you don't care how you dress, which of course, reveals how much you do. And you think Pastor Dustin has cool hair. Like John of old, you have an ache; a holy longing. You are searching for something greater than yourself. Something to really believe in. You're

passionate about justice in the world and you want to make it a better place, but something inside of you whispers that this world isn't all there is – at least you hope it's not.

That was John. There was a big synagogue in nearby Capernaum and he knew the religious beliefs and practices of the day. But they didn't satisfy his ache. So he went out into the desert to hear this prophet, John the Baptist. One day Jesus came to John the Baptist and the prophet declared, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29). This declaration was enough for John to leave John the Baptist and to follow Jesus. Later Jesus would personally call him as Matthew records, "*And going 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.*" (Matthew 4:21-22). This began John's journey with Jesus.

What was John like? What was his personality and character?

Old John – Ambitious, Angry, and Arrogant

You say, it can't be! Ambitious, angry, and arrogant? Yes. This is why John's story is so encouraging. Let's see just how bad it was.

Ambitious and Arrogant

"And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to him, "We are able." (Mark 10:35-39)

Can you picture this? James and John approach Jesus with a small request. *This is no big deal. You were probably thinking this anyway, Jesus. We just would like to tell you where – in our estimation of our importance to the organization – we deserve to be in your kingdom. You probably already have our names etched in these chairs, but could we seal the deal that James and I will spend eternity at your right hand and at your left?* To be at his right and left was to be number 2 and 3 in the glorious kingdom of God.

Did John have an inflated view of himself? Was he ambitious? Was he also naïve? Jesus asks, *Can you suffer as I will?* Their response: *We can. No problem.*

James and John. The young ones. Filled with a sense of self-importance. Eager to rise up the ladder. Brimming with self-confidence and making utter fools of themselves in the process.

I remember the story told of well-known pastor Chuck Swindoll back when he was at the height of his popularity. He visited a seminary to speak and all the seminary students flocked around him like a celebrity. As he walked down the hallway, students vied for his attention. Finally one of them shouted, "Pastor Swindoll, someday I want to be just like you!" Swindoll stopped, looked at him and said, "You want to be like me? If you knew what the Lord had to take me through to get me to where I am today, I really doubt it."

That young seminarian got a dose of reality. John, as a disciple, was young and ambitious, and he assessed his own maturity and importance far beyond reality. Sound like anybody

you know? Sound like you? Sounds like me. This is very much my story as well. When I was younger, people told me all kinds of things they meant to be encouraging, but put the spirit of John in my heart. I came to Bethel as Senior Pastor when I was 29. Just that says a lot. I think back to things I did and things I said, and I can relate to Old John. Swindoll's words echo in my ears with how God deals with us in our pride and self-confidence. He takes us down. He has to if he is going to get the glory for what he does in us. Once we are broken, then he can use us. Old John hadn't learned that yet.

Angry

And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" (Luke 9:52-56)

This was not John's best moment. A village refused to welcome Jesus and his disciples. John is incensed by this. *How can they not welcome us? Don't they realize who we are?* His carnal passions welled within him and anger produced a solution to the problem: *Jesus, should I call down fire from heaven on them and kill every last one of them?* Does that sound like the Apostle of Love? John is very quick to condemn and to kill.

Further, how did John come to think he could summon fire from heaven? Can you hear the snickers from the other disciples? *John thinks he can call fire down from heaven! The fisherman?* What did Jesus think of his idea? *But he turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village.* Are you getting the profile? Hothead. Ambitious. Aiming to be top dog. Filled with self-importance. It's not a pretty picture, is it? Yet, who does he remind us of? I hope he reminds us of ourselves. There is a little bit of Old John in all of us because Old John was a sinner and sinners are quick to condemn others. Sinners think they are way more spiritual and godly than they really are. Sinners are generally self-righteous idiots.

So here's the question, how does a guy like this become the Apostle of Love? Here's the encouragement. If it can happen to John, then maybe it can happen to me.

New John – What Happened? The Love of Christ

You could try and point to various moments that changed him. He personally witnessed the Transfiguration. He saw all the miracles. He heard all Jesus' teachings. He watched Jesus in the day-to-day of life. He spent three years in Jesus' innermost circle and was chosen by Jesus to accompany him in his darkest hour at Gethsemane. No doubt all those were influential in John's life.

What happened to John? Love. Specifically, the love of Christ for him. Why do I say love? Because in John's gospel, this is what he repeats over and over.

*"One of his disciples, **whom Jesus loved**, was reclining at table close to Jesus, so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" (John 13:23-25)*

John is often called the beloved disciple because that is what he calls himself. Here we have a physical picture of the closeness between Jesus and John. In the Upper Room, John is actually leaning against Jesus, probably with his back. There's nothing unseemly here. It was culturally acceptable. It was a sign of friendship and closeness.

- "When Jesus saw his mother **and the disciple whom he loved** standing nearby..." (John 19:26)
- "So she (Mary) ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, **the one whom Jesus loved**... (John 20:2)
- "**That disciple whom Jesus loved** therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" (John 21:7)

New John writes his gospel and doesn't even use his own name in the story. He simply says, *the disciple Jesus loved*. He doesn't call himself "The disciple Jesus forgave" or "the disciple Jesus chose" or something else. John speaks of himself over and over as the disciple Jesus loved. It's as if John can't get over that Jesus would love someone like him. Someone as hotheaded and arrogant as Old John. Still, Jesus loved him. Old John thought he deserved Christ's love; New John wouldn't even use his own name and chose a designation that glorified Christ's love for him.

When this change happened exactly, we don't know. We know John ran to the empty tomb, looked in, and believed. Perhaps then. Perhaps later at Pentecost when the Spirit came. Here's what we know, New John never got over Christ's love for him; that Christ would love someone like him.

- "See what kind of love the Father has given to us." (1 John 3:1)
- "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us." (1 John 3:16)
- "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." (1 John 4:11)

Is it no wonder that New John would write the most famous verse in the Bible? And what was its focus? Love: *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* (John 3:16)

John 3:16. God so loved the world that he expressed that eternal love in a person – Jesus. That incarnated expression of divine love loved the world in the opposite way the world loves. The world loves in order to receive, always asking, *What's in it for me?* But not the love of Christ. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son. Gave is sending to earth but "gave" is also what he did on the cross. Gave is sacrifice. Gave is selfless. It's divine love on display in Christ's torturous and atoning death on the cross. A divine love. A transforming love. John knew Jesus for three years, but it wasn't until the cross and the resurrection that the extent of Christ's love for him changed him. He truly believed. Old John became New John. The disciple of anger became the Apostle of Love.

Does John's life tell us anything about what it means to truly be a follower of Jesus? I think it does. We all can relate to Old John. The question is, can we relate to New John? This is not to say that real Christians can't at times be hotheads, arrogant, and filled with self-importance. But it is to say that when we have a real faith encounter with Jesus, his love for us is increasingly formed in us. If I had more time I could develop this, but read through the Gospel of John and the epistles of John and over and over again, John calls God's people to love each other with the same kind of love that we have received from Christ.

John's main message is if we truly know God's love for us in Christ we will love each other. If we don't love each other, we don't know the love of God.

Is that a relevant message for the church? How about for our relationships with one another? How about for Christian marriage and family? Love. *Self-giving for the good and joy of another* just as God self-gave for our good and eternal joy. Love like God, John says.

In fact, church history tells us that as a very old man, he was still pastoring the church in Ephesus. For his last sermon, they carried him into the assembly, and with a weak voice of an aged man, he said, *Love one another*. A three word sermon. *Love one another*.

It's hard to believe that the guy who once wanted to destroy a whole village with fire from heaven would leave as his pastoral legacy, *Love one another*. But that's what Christ's love does. It changes us. It softens our hearts even to our enemies. It turns us into self-givers. How are you doing with that? Got some people in your life that if you could, you'd bring out the flamethrower and show them who is holy?

How about this question, if you were to write a gospel, what would you call yourself? Would your name be in bold? Or would you, like John, simply say, all I am is a disciple that Jesus mercifully loved. That was New John. Christians, do we get it? Do we realize who we are, and does this produce a humility that Christ would love somebody like me?

John writes and here's the key, *we love him because he first loved us*. John never got over his amazement. *The disciple Jesus loved*. Wow! *Amazing love, how can it be? That thou my God shouldst die for me!*

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