

1 JOHN

Part 1: “The First Word”

1 John 1:1–4

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Scripture Reading

“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).

Introduction

History fascinates me.

I love learning about people that have gone before our time—their stories, their choices, and their ways of life—and how their lives still effect the world we live in today.

But if you think about it, the task of reconstructing history is a tricky business. History is not like science. You can’t put history under a microscope to observe it in real time. You can experiment on history or repeat history in a laboratory.

No, the only way we know history is to investigate it through artifacts and historical records. But every now and then, we have more than artifacts and records about the people of history. Every now and then, we can read the very words of historical actors and eyewitnesses through *letters*.

We can read the letter that the Protestant reformer Martin Luther wrote Pope Leo X, and we can hear his voice as he boldly challenges the abuses, the greed, and the errant doctrines of the Roman Church.

We can read the letter the scientist Albert Einstein wrote to President Franklin Roosevelt, warning him that Adolph Hitler and the Nazi regime was developing nuclear warheads. And in that letter we are able to witness the brilliance of Einstein, as well as his very human fear and concern.

We can read the letter that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote from the Birmingham jail, passionately pleading with his fellow pastors to see the image of God within people with black skin.

We can sense the fierce determination of the founding fathers of the United States [show 1Declaration], when we read the Declaration of Independence, which is probably the most significant and famous letter in American history; the letter penned by Thomas Jefferson and sent to King George III of Great Britain.

Simply said, letters have the power to bring the passion and the people and the events of history into the present moment, so that we might see through the eyes that have gone before us.

I say this because, today, we are not just exploring the words of Scripture. We are exploring a real letter written by a real person to a real community of people about a very real savior.

Today, we are beginning a journey through an ancient letter that now refer to as 1 John. 1 John is an *epistle*, which is an official letter written by an apostle to a church or group of churches. An epistle gives specific instructions and commands regarding what Christians should believe and how they should love.

And though this letter is relatively short—at just over 2,000 words long—it is a book that has had a dramatic impact on generations of Christians from around the world. It is the book that has inspired us to walk in the light as our God is in the light (1 John 1:7). It is the book that calls us to love one another as God has loved us (1 John 4:11). It is the book that reveals the life-changing, history-shaping truth that God is love (1 John 4:8), and that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). It is a book that will profoundly transform your life if you let it.

So, this morning, and all throughout this series, I want to encourage you to lean in. Hear not just the words but the voice of the Apostle John. Feel the passion, the authority, the hope, and the love that emanate from the letter that he has written.

Today's sermon is simply titled "The First Word."

It is "The First Word" because today we will be exploring the first four verses of chapter 1 in a section that is known as "The Prologue," which literally means "the first word." But the first word also points us toward Jesus Christ, the Word of God—the Word of Life—that was from the very beginning.

Think of a prologue as an official introduction. It is the entry hall that welcomes you into a larger house. A hallway through which we have access to different rooms of a mansion. As we delve into the four short verses of today's passage, we will explore three big ideas that will be important for us to know and remember throughout this entire letter. We

will examine 1.) The Context of 1 John, 2.) The Author of 1 John, and 3.) The Purpose of 1 John.

Exposition

1) The Context of 1 John

In the days and weeks that followed the death and resurrection of Jesus, there were less than two hundred people that were disciples of Jesus; less than two hundred people who believed Jesus rose from the grave; less than two hundred people that worshipped Jesus as Lord.

In the early days, every single Christian was ethnically Jewish; every single Christian lived within the geographical boundary of the Holy Land, and every single Christian on the planet knew one another by name.

But in a mere few decades, many things have dramatically changed since those early days of Christianity. The holy city of Jerusalem has been sacked, and Jewish temple is now destroyed. This means that Christianity will no longer be centered out of Jerusalem. And the Christian community is no longer comprised of those who are exclusively Jewish in ethnicity or race.

By the year A.D. 100, what started as a small Jewish sect of Jesus followers, barely over a hundred people, has now become an international movement spread across the Mediterranean world.

The disciples of Jesus set off from the regions of Judea and Galilee to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom and invite people into the way of Jesus. There are now small Christian communities, called "churches," in great metropolitan cities like Antioch in Syrian, Alexandria in Egypt, Rome in Italy, and Ephesus in Asia Minor. Christianity would forever become a faith for people of *all* nations.

But Christianity is also at a critical turning point.

Almost all of the original disciples of Jesus—the first eyewitnesses of his life, death, and resurrection—have all died. Most of the early apostles, the main leaders of the Christian movement, like Peter and Paul, have not just died. They have been martyred. They have been murdered for their devotion to Jesus.

If the Christian gospel is to endure, it is now the job of the second generation of Christian leaders to commit themselves to deep devotion and discipleship.

And this is no easy task. With the fall of Jerusalem and the explosive growth of Christianity among the gentile nations, the gospel is at risk of being severed from the Old Testament and its Jewish roots. It is a moment when non-Christian ideas from

pagan religion and Greek philosophy are trying to infiltrate and malform the gospel into something that it was never meant to be.

Even more concerning, most of the people who actually knew Jesus are no longer alive. Thus, there is tremendous pressure to refashion Jesus that he never was.

So, at the turn of the first century, there is an especially strong temptation to over-spiritualize Jesus. Some false teachers have even gone so far as to deny the humanity and the physicality of Jesus coming in the flesh to dwell among us. They spoke of a Jesus who was known only through secret knowledge and secretive cults; a Jesus who has come that we might escape the material world. Such Jesus, conveniently, does not care about our embodied existence or our everyday lives.

This false version of Jesus is found nowhere in the words of the gospels. But it was a version of Jesus that greatly appealed to the cultural appetite of the ancient world.

Now, this is not all that different from our cultural moment. We, too, live at a pivotal and seminal moment in human history. Many great Christians who have gone before us are now with the Lord. If this gospel is to go forward, if this gospel is to endure, the task falls to us to commit ourselves to devotion, even though we live in an age of distraction.

Moreover, we, too, live in a moment wherein there is a great temptation to worship a Jesus that has been refashioned according to our cultural preferences and idolatries. Many worship a Prosperity Jesus that is nothing more than a stepping-stone to material wealth and health. Many worship a Political Jesus that reduces Jesus to nothing more than a mascot of our political team.

Distorted versions of Jesus produce a distorted gospel and divided church. This is one of the great challenges of Christianity today in the twenty-first century, and it was one of the great challenges for Christianity in the first century as well.

At the time 1 John was written, several false teachers had just left or been expelled from a group of churches in the region of Asia Minor [show 2Asia Minor](or what we would call modern-day Turkey). They are leaving behind many Christians who are discouraged by division, many Christians who are confused by bad doctrine, and many Christians who are even beginning to endure persecution for their faith in Christ.

Several questions weigh on everyone's mind. Will the Christian church stay united? Will they be able to endure tensions that are inside and the cultural pressures that are outside of the church? Will they remain faithful to Jesus, or will the real Jesus be forgotten?

It is amidst these very real and enduringly relevant questions that an Apostle named John is moved by the Holy Spirit to write a letter that we now call 1 John.

2) The Author of 1 John

Though his name is never mentioned in the text, the vast majority of Christians from the earliest days of the church have associated 1 John with John, the son of Zebedee. John was one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus. And not only is he one of the twelve disciples; at the time he writes this letter, he is likely the last surviving member of the original followers of Jesus.

For a moment, I want us to imagine what it would have been like to be John. John was once a fisherman, working on the shores of the Sea of Galilee with his father and his older brother James.

He can still remember the day, that he first saw a rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth with his own eyes [3The Call of John]. And he can still remember the day this rabbi called him to leave behind his life of fishing to become a disciple.

With his own ears, John heard the powerful sermons of Jesus. With his own eyes, he witnessed Jesus feed five thousand people, heal blind eyes, and walk on water. He listened to Jesus command the storm and the waves, and he watched as they obeyed his commands. He even saw Jesus raise the dead to life again.

John remembers following Jesus to the top of the mountain, together with his brother James and his friend Peter. He remembers beholding the unveiled glory of Jesus [show 4Transfiguration], as he transfigured before them and even spoke with the Old Testament heroes Moses and the prophet Elijah. And, there, while glimpsing the transcendent divinity of Christ, he remembers hearing the voice of God the Father thunder the words, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him."

But John also remembers the last supper of Jesus. He remembers falling asleep, as Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane [show 5Gethsemane]. He remembers the sudden shock of Jesus's arrest and Judas's betrayal. He remembers watching in horror as his master was bound and beaten and condemned to death.

John remembers standing next to Mary [show 6Cross], the mother of Jesus, as Jesus hung, humiliated, on a Roman cross for three long hours before breathing his last and succumbing to death. He remembers watching Jesus's body taken down from the cross, wrapped in linen, and laid in a sealed tomb.

But John also remembers when the third day came. He remembers hearing claims that the stone had been rolled away. And he remembers sprinting to the tomb [show 7Empty Tomb]. He remembers stooping inside only to find that the tomb was empty and the burial cloths neatly folded. It was then that he remembers believing.

Then, he remembers seeing with his own eyes the resurrected Jesus. He remembers beholding Thomas [show 8Thomas], one of the disciples placing his own fingers within Jesus's nail marks in his hands.

But even then, the story does not end. John remembers when Jesus commissioned the disciples to take the good news of God's kingdom into all nations. He remembers the day Jesus ascended into heaven. And he remembers the day [show 9Pentecost] he and his fellow believers were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

He remembers watching as thousands believed and were baptized. He remembers the earth shaking when his fellow apostles would gather to pray. He remembers the gospel spreading into other communities and other nations.

But, no doubt, he remembers the day when his own brother James would become the first of the original disciples to be martyred. And as the apostles went forth, and the good news spread, John remembers hearing the news of his friends dying one by one, as a result of persecution.

He remembers when the armies of Rome destroyed the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. He remembers leaving his homeland and living the rest of his life in exile in the region of Asia Minor. And now, as an old man [show 10Old John], the last of the living apostles, John sees the struggles of several small Christian communities.

He sees how they are discouraged by those who left. He knows how they are confused by different doctrines. And he knows there all kinds of crazy and contradictory ideas about who Jesus really was.

And it is in this moment, and in this situation of crisis, that John writes these inspired words: *"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—"* (1 John 1:1–2).

John is saying, "Guys, Jesus is not theoretical for me. I know the man, and I know the man. I have beheld him with my own eyes. I still hear the sound of his voice. I remember walking with him, talking with him, and eating meals with him. I watched him die on the cross and have beheld him risen again. He was a man, just like you are me, but he was so much more. He is the word through which all things were made! He is the Word who was with God and who was God. He is the divine word made human flesh. He has dwelt among us, and we have beheld his glory!"

John is saying, "Those guys who are telling you about another Jesus; they don't know what they are talking about. I do. I'm not writing you about something novel and new. I am telling you that which is ancient and true. I am reminding you of the real Jesus!"

3) **The Purpose of 1 John**

Now, when we talk about purpose, we already know that this whole letter is about Jesus—the real and true Jesus. John wants his readers to know Jesus, believe in Jesus, and trust in Jesus. But what will this accomplish? John will answer that question in the next few verses.

First, he says, “...*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* (1 John 1:3).

At the core of our being, we long to be fully known and fully loved. It is the most fundamental need that we have. But because of sin, we are estranged from God and alienated from one another.

But when we come to a true knowledge of Jesus, we receive more than just true knowledge about God. When we trust in Jesus—who he is and what he has done for us—we are given communion with God himself. We are united with God, and we find fellowship with one another in that union with God.

So, if you feel isolated, if you feel forgotten, if you feel like a stranger, I want you to know that when you trust in Jesus, you get more than just forgiveness—you get a family. You belong. You have a place. You have a purpose.

And sure, that means a place of relational connection within the living body of Christ that is the church. But it is also something cosmically larger than that. You are a part of the people of God that spans both space and time. You are granted a place within the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You are of the same community as Peter, James, and even John himself.

Thus, John is writing this letter so that those who read it would encounter Jesus and, through Jesus, find fellowship and belonging. But even more, he is writing this letter so that those who read it find their truest joy.¹

He writes, “*And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete*” (1 John 1:4).

God is not just for your joy, and he is not just for my joy. He is for *our* joy.

Now, the idea that God is for our joy may surprise some of you. Perhaps, many of us have reduced our vision of Christianity to nothing more than trying hard to snuff out our desires. And it is true that God want to reorder the loves of our heart to that which is true and good and beautiful.

¹ The theme of joy is a pronounced theme elsewhere in Johannine literature (cf. John 15:11; 16:24).

But striving to eliminate all desires is not a Christian way of thinking. God is not against our hunger for joy. Indeed, he is more for our joy than we could ever imagine.

For the joy John speaks of is not a joy that is at the mercy of our external circumstances, our internal mood swings, or fleeting appetites. He is showing us the gateway to real joy, abiding joy, eternal joy, and perfect joy that is found in Christ alone. For it is Christ that we find the fullness of joy and life forevermore!

As the great C.S. Lewis once wrote: *"...it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around 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 sea. We are far too easily satisfied."*²

Conclusion

The book of 1 John is not just an abstract theological treatise. It is a personal letter to a very real people. Yes, it was for an ancient group of people who spoke a different language and lived on the other side of our planet, dealing with their suffering and struggles.

But as the living word of God—inspired by the very breath of the Holy Spirit—it is for all of God's people for all time. 1 John is for the discouraged, the confused, and those who need to be reminded of the simple way of Jesus of Nazareth.

This book is for those who long to see the face of Jesus and hear his voice, those who need belonging, and those who long for deep, abiding, and eternal joy.

This book is for you.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we hear and receive the words of the Apostle John. May we know Christ as the true word of life that was from the beginning. May we, too, share in fellowship with apostles and union with our God. And may we know perfect and complete joy that is in Christ alone!

AMEN.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperOne, 1949), 26.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. *Read 1 John 1:1–4. How does this paragraph speak to some of the challenges early Christian leaders faced in preserving the gospel after the death of the original disciples of Jesus?*
2. *What were some of the false teachings about Jesus that emerged in the first century, and how were they addressed? How is the challenge of preserving the true gospel relevant to Christians today?*
3. *Consider what we know about the Apostle John. What are some of the key events from John's life as a disciple of Jesus, and how might they have influenced his writing of 1 John?*
4. *What does this passage teach about the nature of Christian "fellowship"?*
5. *What is the significance of John's statement that he is writing this letter so that his readers' "joy may be complete," and how does this contrast with some common misconceptions about Christianity?*