

Eyewitness Summary

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[0:00] Tonight we're going to start looking at 1 John.

The plan is to only look at this book during those weeks when Don needs a substitute.! 1 John lends itself to that approach because the letter often revisits several themes, so we'll have some built-in review if we go a few weeks without covering this book.

Tonight's lesson will barely scratch the surface, though. We'll look at the letter's background, and you'll see that we'll cover the first four verses. So just to get those verses in your mind, let's go ahead and read those.

Here's 1 John 1, 1 through 4. It says, So before we look at the verses in detail, let's set the context. According to the verses we just read, who's the author of 1 John? Well, the verses actually don't say who the author is, but the epistle has traditionally been ascribed to John the Apostle, as you know.

[1:34] But nowhere in this book do you actually find John's name. But it's plain from the tone of the letter as a whole that the writer possessed spiritual authority. And in fact, one of the reasons why people are so convinced that it's John is because he would be one of the few people that wouldn't need to make an introduction to the church.

Moreover, he also put himself among the eyewitnesses to the incarnate life of Jesus Christ. And so that narrows down the possibilities as well. Early Christian writers, including Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian, all cited the Apostle as John's writing.

So there's really no good reason to deny the traditional belief that the letter is from John. And we know quite a bit about John, but let's do some review. Remember that John and his brother James were known as the sons of Zebedee, and Jesus gave them the name Sons of Thunder.

So John was one of the three most intimate associates of Jesus, along with Peter and James. And being an eyewitness to and participant in Jesus' earthly ministry, he was included in the inner circle when all the events happened.

So in addition to the three epistles of 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John, John also authored the fourth gospel, and we know that he authored Revelation as well. And if you remember, he identified himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved, and the one who reclined on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper in the gospel that bears his name.

[3:03] And as I said, we know that he also wrote Revelation. So if you look at verses 1 through 4 again, when does it say the letter was written? It actually doesn't tell us when the letter was written, and so it's really difficult to precisely date it, but historical indications are there around the time.

Most likely, John composed the work in the latter part of the first century, and that's because early Christian figures like Polycarp and Papias presupposed or cite first John in their writings.

So likely, the date of composition was no later than the 90s AD, and so this dovetails with the testimony of the church fathers that shortly before AD 67, John joined other Christians in departing Jerusalem prior to the destruction by the Romans.

John reportedly returned to his apostolic ministry in the vicinity of the great but highly adulterous city of Ephesus. So most likely, this was written in Ephesus in modern western Turkey.

So looking at verse 4 again, who does John say should be the recipients of this letter? So how am I doing so far? We haven't proven exactly who wrote it, or when he wrote it, or who he wrote it to, but we actually have a lot more detail about the actual recipients of the letter.

[4:25] The letter actually has no hint about the identity or location of the readers beyond the fact that they are Christians, and we'll talk about why we can be so sure that they are Christians in just a little bit. Most people, though, think that because John was in Ephesus, like I said, his readers probably lived in that area as well.

And this association is also confirmed in Revelation 2 and 3, so it is quite likely that they lived around Ephesus too. But let's talk about how we can know that these early readers were Christians. We can look a little further forward in the letter and see some verses that clearly point that out. Listen to 2.12 to 2.14. John says, I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.

So you can tell by those references there that he's clearly writing to believers, and that's his intended audience. But if you just look a little further down in chapter 2, verse 21 says this. It says, I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. And then if you skip all the way to nearly the end of the book, look at John 5.13.

[6:03] John 5.13 is the verse that says, These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

So clearly you can tell from that verse he's writing to believers. Notice how many times he said believe in that verse. And 1 John 5.13 also gives us one of the purposes of the book.

So listen to that verse one more time. He says, These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

So one of the verses we've already read tonight, too, summarizes another purpose. If you go all the way back to chapter one and look at verse four, that's where John says, And these things we write to you, that your joy may be full.

So with the purposes we've just summarized, you can kind of infer that something or some things must have been threatening the original recipient's beliefs and joy. And we can figure out what some of that is just by looking at the letter itself, and also thinking about what we know about the city of Ephesus around that time.

[7:17] Ephesus was within the intellectual center of Asia Minor. And if you'll remember, the Apostle Paul predicted that false teachers would arise from the church's own ranks. That was several years before this letter was actually written.

And those false teachers were starting to saturate the climate with different philosophical trends, and they began infiltrating the church and infecting it with false doctrine. And so they were really starting to call into question the teaching of the apostles.

And one of those things that was a problem was Gnosticism. And based on the concept that matter is evil and spirit is good, the Gnostics concluded that if God was truly good, he couldn't have created the material universe.

So they tried to say that some lesser God had to have created it. And according to them, the God of the Old Testament was this lesser God. And they also believed that Jesus didn't have a physical body.

And this teaching, called Docetism, claimed that Jesus only appeared to have a human body and never actually suffered pain and death on the cross. And another heresy around that time that John addressed in this letter was Corinthianism.

[8:28] And this heresy taught that Jesus was just a man upon whom Christ ascended at his baptism, and that the Christ departed from Jesus just before his crucifixion. So they said that the spiritual Christ didn't really suffer and die for humanity's sins on the cross, but he only appeared to do so.

So do you see the two different approaches of these false teachings? One says that Jesus was God, but not man. The other says that Jesus was man, but not God. And both have the same effect, really.

They both try to diminish Jesus and discredit his work on the cross. So if you think about what we face today, do we see false teachers today who try to diminish Jesus' work on the cross?

That's pretty common today as well, isn't it? We've already talked about the letter omitting a reference to the original recipients. But the letter was no doubt intended ultimately for the warning and instruction of the whole church or the churches that read it.

And its truths are richly applicable to Christians' experience today as well. So that means the letter is applicable to us, and it still refutes the false teachings that exist today.

[9:37] So we'll actually start looking at the verses now, and verses 1 through 4 of 1 John provide an eyewitness summary, and they lay the foundation for the entire letter.

So let's read the verses as a group again, then we'll start digging into the details. It says, So we're going to break the verses into three sections.

And for those of you who are filling in the blanks, we finally get to the first blank in the handout. The first section, covering verses 1 and 2, has a definite testimony. So definite testimony is what we'll see there.

While you're writing that down, let's look at those verses. It says, Conservative commentators actually differ on the meaning of the very first phrase, which is that which was from the beginning. So we'll break that into sections and talk about some various possible meanings. Then we'll settle on one. But I think you'll see, though, that all of them fit with the Reformed view of Scripture. So if you look at just the first two words, that which could refer to the revelation about Christ.

[11:28] It could refer to the teachings of Christ, the eternal life manifested by Christ, or even Christ himself. But because it's followed by the words heard, seen, looked upon, and handled, this indicates that Christ himself is the likely subject.

Then if you think about the beginning, the beginning may refer to creation or to the beginning of Christ's ministry. And if it's creation, it's like the statement about Jesus Christ and creation in John's Gospel.

In John's Gospel, listen to what John wrote in John 1, 1 through 5. It says, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him nothing was made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

Of course, John 1, 1 through 5 also directly refutes the claims that Jesus was man but not God. So the view about this version of the beginning actually fits with one of the purposes that John had.

[12:38] However, when you think about it, the context of 1 John seems to indicate that John had a different view in mind, and likely he thought that it was referring to the beginning of Jesus' ministry in this case.

And that's because the phrase, the beginning, emphasizes the stability of the Gospel message.

When you think about it, the Gospel message's contents don't change, but they remain stable from the very beginning.

It's not subject to change due to current worldly fads or philosophical thinking. So most likely what John is saying there is that we have been with Jesus since the beginning of his ministry.

So if you put yourself back in that time, false teachers had spread bad information about Jesus, but John was there from the very beginning. And based on his first-hand experience, John determined to set the record straight.

The false teachers brought new ideas about Jesus, but their ideas couldn't be verified firsthand from the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Those false teachers' ideas then were easily refutable by someone who was an eyewitness.

[13:43] And of course, John was that eyewitness. So we talked about how one of the heresies denied that Jesus was a real person. If you look at the verbs in the rest of verse 1, how do they directly contradict the idea that Jesus was not a real person?

Yeah. John uses the phrases, we have heard, we have seen, we have looked upon. And then when you get into it, he says, our hands have handled. It's kind of hard to handle somebody who's not a real person.

But the words used here actually point to the recollection that John had of the person of Jesus. So even in John's old age, and probably 60 years after he'd last seen Jesus, those memories were permanently etched in his mind, just like they happened yesterday.

And he uses the strong terms to really affirm the physical reality of Jesus. Because, like we said, a spirit can't be heard or gazed at for long periods of time, can't be touched or handled as Jesus was by John during his earthly ministry, and even after Jesus' resurrection.

So the verb looked upon there is different from seen. And so we'll talk about how looked upon is different from seen. It may actually be a subtle reference to John 1.14, where it's used in the sense of discerning the supernatural glory of Christ.

[15:12] So one instance is where they're talking about actually seeing Jesus. The other instance is where they're talking about discerning his glory. So they saw his glory and they looked upon him as well.

But you can see there's two different ideas there. The verb touched is the same word used in Luke 24.39, when the resurrected Jesus invites the disciples to prove for themselves that his body is real. That's when he asks them to touch him. But because the word seen is also used there, John may actually be referring to this very incident when he writes these words. So in that case, he proclaims himself not only as a witness of Jesus' ministry and message, but also of Jesus' resurrection. And that resurrection, after all, is what validates Jesus' message as God's message. And it also validates that Jesus himself is God. So we've got Tom here tonight.

Does an eyewitness have more credibility than someone who was absent when something important happened? In most cases, they actually do have more credibility than someone who wasn't there.

[16 : 24] And the last verse then, or the last phrase of verse 1, talks about what the eyewitness heard and saw. And he saw the word of life. And the word of life there may refer to Jesus, who is the word and the life.

And of course, that comes from John 1 that we read, when it identified him as the word. And John 14.6 identifies himself as the life. And it could also talk about the gospel message itself, and all that it says about eternal life.

Most likely, though, the reference there is to Jesus, because he is the word who brings that life to us. And we need to remember that this life is a gift from God, and it's a gift that can't be earned, and it also can't be taken away from us.

So let's recap where we are right here before we go on to verse 2. The eyewitnesses heard, saw, and touched the word of life. That was the eternal Son of God, Jesus the Christ, who had come in the flesh.

And this fact is emphasized even more as we get into verse 2, because verse 2 says, So the life that was manifested to the apostles is now declared by them.

[17 : 41] So the life wasn't hidden or obscured so that few, if any, could find it. Rather, this life was made known openly and had its origins in God the Father. So God had provided the truth about himself in nature and through the prophets of old, but the revelation in his Son is God's finest and clearest presentation of himself.

And of course, those words probably remind you of what the writer of Hebrews said. The writer of Hebrews described it in this way in Hebrews 1, 1, and 2. He says, God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the world.

So the life which the apostles proclaimed is intensely personal. Not only has that life appeared, but it's nothing less than eternal life, and it's the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to people.

So let's think about that implication for us, because through the eternal life of Christ, those who believe in him also have eternal life. And John may have had Jesus' own words in mind when he wrote verse 2 of 1 John.

Listen to this quote from Jesus in John's Gospel. This is John 5, 24. Jesus said, Eternal life begins immediately, in a partially realized but significant way, any time someone believes in Jesus.

[19 : 18] Do you think most Christians today really understand that eternal life begins when we become believers in Jesus? When do most people actually think eternal life begins?

When they get full understanding. Yep, some when they get full understanding. Some think it happens when they pass away. But I put this detail in your handout because I thought it was a pretty good quote.

One commentator put it this way. He said, We tend to think of eternal life in terms of longevity. We talk of living forever. Really though, longevity is a result, almost a side effect, of eternal life.

Eternal life is a quality of life, the nature of life, perhaps even the essence of life. Jesus imparts it to us to help us live godly, fulfilling lives in the here and now.

It gives us spirituality. It provides longevity because of its nature. It can't be destroyed by death. Ultimately, it means being with God eternally, just as Jesus came from God.

[20 : 19] And here's a piece to really get in your mind. Let us sip this life now that Jesus imparts to us through his word. So we get a taste of that eternal life when we study his word.

So that brings us to the second section of the study. And John tells us again that the word of life gives us divine fellowship. So let's look at that divine fellowship.

And that's covered in verse 3. Verse 3 says, That which we have seen and heard, we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us. And truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

So John's getting back into the flow of things of the first verse after elaborating on the word of life in verse 2. You notice that seen and heard are the same verbs that begin verse 1.

And we declare is the principal statement of the first three verses. So before we talk about verse 3 itself, let's consider the significance of the repetition. Because John dramatically reemphasizes through repetition of words like manifested, seen, bear witness, heard, and declare in verses 2 and 3.

[21 : 31] That reference verse 1 as well. The authority of his own personal experience as an eyewitness of Jesus' life. So the repetition pointedly reminds his readers about John's personal testimony.

And that testimony refutes the false teachers who boasted arrogantly and wrongly about the Christ that they had never seen or known. So once we have that belief in Jesus, fellowship is the result. And I put this quote in your handout as well. So had you ever really thought of that before? That it's impossible to have fellowship with God unless you're saved? That's something that we'll see as we go through 1 John. Of course, that's referenced in other areas outside of Scripture. But it is important for us to remember that John does equate fellowship with God with salvation. And here's something else to notice. We've talked about Jesus a lot so far, so you might not have realized this.

[22 : 53] But if you actually look at the verses themselves, verse 3 is actually the first time that Jesus Christ is referenced by name. So John's been building up to actually mentioning his name in verse 3.

And also, if you look at it, the first three verses are all one sentence. That's sometimes harder to see when we break up the verses like that. So he's been building that entire long sentence up to revealing that he's talking about Jesus Christ.

So he's saying that he is the word of life and the eternal life, and he's the message proclaimed. And he's also the ultimate facilitator of fellowship with God. And he's saying that they will have that fellowship with God if they believe in Jesus.

But if they don't believe in Jesus, they won't have that fellowship with God. So the purpose of this letter, then, is to keep them within the true fellowship of God's genuine family based upon the apostolic testimony.

And also the testimony about Jesus himself, who is the word of life. So John's proclamation of the message of Jesus' divinity, then, is bold and confident. And when you think about it, likely the false teachers deny that the readers possessed eternal life.

[24 : 03] And if so, and if the readers would begin to doubt God's guarantee on that point, their fellowship with the Father and with his Son could be in jeopardy. We know that they could never lose their gift of life if they're true believers.

But they could lose their joy in that fellowship. So John really wants to make sure they have that fellowship. And that fellowship depends on walking in the light, which we see from 1 John 1.7.

So John's aim, therefore, was to furnish his readers with the necessary reaffirmation of the basic truths of their faith, so that their fellowship with God would be sustained. So is it possible to still be saved and lose your fellowship with God?

What's one of the things that can hinder our fellowship with God? Unconfessed sin. Yep.

Unconfessed sin is definitely one of those things. And if you think about Psalm 51, it talks about restoring to me the joy of my salvation. David doesn't say to restore my salvation. He says to restore the joy of my salvation.

[25 : 06] And that ties into verse 4, because verse 4 has the last section of John's prologue. In it, we see a joyful purpose. So joyful purpose is what goes into your blank there.

Verse 4 is a short verse. It says, These things we write to you, that your joy may be full. So how many of you have a translation that says, These things we write to you, that our joy may be full. I figure there would be several out there, because other translations, including the English Standard, the New American Standard, and the New International Version, say our joy instead of your joy there.

Several early and reliable manuscripts have it both ways. The difference, just like in English in this case, is only one letter in the Greek. But in this case, our probably includes the readers with the sense of all of our in there.

So John is saying, all of our joy, even if he meant just our joy there. And one reason we can say that is because he's just used our in that same sense in verse 3, when he talked about our fellowship, being with the Father and with his Son.

[26:19] So even if it really should be our there, John is really talking about all of our, so you can also read it as your as well. And when you think about it, a Christian can have no real joy except in a proper relationship with God and others.

So if the false teachers against whom John writes should have undue impact on his readers, they may fail to maintain their close bond of Christian joy. So he writes to give them the truth that they need to sustain their relationship with the people of God and with the apostles.

Believers having full joy is a common biblical theme both in the Old and the New Testament. So here are a few cross-references to remind ourselves of that. In Psalm 1611, David wrote, You will show me the path of life, and your presence is fullness of joy.

At your right hand are pleasures forevermore. Then in Zechariah 9.9, we see these words, Rejoice greatly, which of course is another way of saying, have full joy.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem. Behold, your king is coming to you. He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey.

[27:32] A colt, the foal of a donkey. The same concept of full joy carries over to the New Testament in other places besides 1 John. If you look at Acts 2.28, Peter actually references David's words that we just read in Psalm 1611.

And then in John 17, in the middle of Jesus' high priestly prayer, Jesus says these words in John 17, 12 and 13. Jesus said, While I was with them in the world, I kept them in your name.

Those whom you gave me I have kept, and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I come to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.

So having fulfilled joy is another way of saying full joy. And John Calvin summarized full joy like this, and it's also in your handout. He says, By full joy, John expresses more clearly the complete and perfect happiness which we obtain through the gospel.

At the same time, he reminds the faithful where they ought to fix all their affections. True is that saying, Wherever your treasure is, there will be your heart also. And of course, that's Matthew 6.21.

[28:46] He goes on to say, Whosoever then really perceives what fellowship with God is will be satisfied with it alone. That's quite a challenge for us because I don't know about you guys, but I don't think I've quite mastered that yet.

Look at that last line. It says, Whosoever then really perceives what fellowship with God is will be satisfied with that alone. And in John's theology, it's impossible to take this joy away from the true believer because believers are sustained in their faith by a fresh proclamation of Christ Jesus and his teachings.

And those teachings are applied in this context in specific ways to combat the heresies that threaten the health and the life of the church by denying that Christ is Jesus, the incarnate Son of God.

And you have that in your handout as well. So you can also look at these verses as a test of whether or not you have true faith because they show a test of whether or not we believe that Jesus is the Christ.

And beyond that, the verses we've studied tonight have application for us in at least two other ways. They have application first in our relationship to God. So they have application in our relationship to God.

[29:56] And then they have application in our relationship to others. So we'll talk about both of these here in just a second. We'll see our relationship to God and our relationship to others.

Because you might have noticed that the proclamation there is actually a progression because first we have the proclamation of the reality of the Gospel and this produces a fellowship in eternal life. And that fellowship in eternal life is what leads to full joy. So this joy then is nothing less than the joy that comes from abiding in Christ's love. just as Christ's joy came from abiding in the Father's love.

The need to abide in Christ's love is how the verses apply to our relationship with God. And listen to one more quote from Jesus. This is John 15, 9-11. John 15, 9-11 are where Jesus says, As the Father loved me, I also have loved you.

Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love. Then verse 11 says, These things I have spoken to you that my joy may remain in you and that your joy may be full.

[31:08] So listen to verse 11 of John 15 one more time. Jesus said, These things I have spoken to you that my joy may remain in you and that your joy may be full.

So there's that full joy phrase again in another place besides 1 John. And this, of course, comes from Jesus Himself. So we've seen how the verses apply to our relationship with God.

Let's talk about how these verses apply to our relationship with other believers. I put both of these quotes in your handout as well. John's concern for our joy also reminds us that we should be concerned about the joy of others.

Like John, we need to feel a burden for those in our Christian fellowship who are being tempted by unhealthy ideas that are leading them away from Orthodox Christianity. So maybe it's Hinduism, Mormonism, the New Age, or just plain old secularism.

Regardless, we shouldn't allow them to be taken away from Christianity without a struggle. We need to perceive what God calls us to speak and not be comfortable with ourselves until we do. You can tell I like this quote because I put it in the handout twice actually.

[32:13] And that's the quote that says, Believers are sustained in their faith by a fresh proclamation of Christ Jesus and His teachings applied in this context in specific ways to combat the heresy that threatened the health and life of the church by denying that the Christ is Jesus, the incarnate Son of God.

So why does denying that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God threaten the health and the life of the church? He is all in place. Yeah. If He's not God, then He's not really qualified to be our Savior.

And if He's not our Savior, then that takes away the health and the life of the church. But we know from these verses that Jesus was and is a real man and also a real God through whom we have fellowship with one another and with God.

And complete joy comes through witnessing personally to our fellowship with God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. And so to paraphrase verse 4, these things John wrote to us so that our joy may be full.

Thank you.