

THE SERMON NOTEBOOK

Johnny L. Sanders, D. Min.

SUBJECT: THE WORD OF LIFE

TITLE: THAT YOUR JOY MAY BE FULL

TEXT: I JOHN 1:1-4

INTRODUCTION. The title of this the first of the three epistles has always been simply 1 John. It was written by the last remaining apostle, John the beloved disciple of our Lord. All the other apostles had been dead for many years now, martyrs for the cause of Jesus Christ. For our purpose here, it is sufficient to note that this epistle was written by John from Ephesus around A.D. 90 -95 to the churches of Asia Minor. No book in the Bible was written without a purpose, and if we are to glean what we should from each book we need a little background information, including the author, the recipients, the circumstances, and the purpose.

A number of years earlier, Paul would be inspired by the Holy Spirit to lay the foundation for the battle against a budding Gnosticism which would become a dominant world view which would influence the thinking of mankind and account for many of the heresies that arose in the church for many generations. As a matter of fact, the New Age Movements, now called Postmodernism, is deeply rooted in Eastern mysticism, which itself is deeply rooted in this same ancient Gnosticism. The Holy Spirit inspired the writing of The Gospel According to John and this epistle to prepare and equip the church for its battle against Gnosticism of that day, and against all heresies of the future.

While it is not particularly easy to outline the First Epistle of John, three important themes are woven together throughout this the longest of John's three epistles. Those three themes are: light vs. darkness, love vs. hatred, and truth vs. error. Warren Wiersbe writes:

These three "strands" weave in and out of the letter, making it difficult to construct a simple outline. The above outline is based on the main lessons of each section, although the careful student will see that the three themes intermingle. In these days when many Christians think they have fellowship with God but do not, and when many religious people think they are true sons of God but are not, it is important that we apply these tests and examine our own lives carefully.

Wiersbe's outline of this epistle will help us to focus on the main themes:

Introduction: The reality of Jesus Christ (1:1-4)

I. The Tests of Fellowship: God is Light (1:5-2:29)

A. The test of obedience (1:5-2:6)

B. The test of love (2:7-17)

C. The test of truth (2:18-29)

II. The Tests of Sonship: God Is Love (3-5)

A. The test of obedience (3:1-24)

B. The test of love (4:1-21)

C. The test of truth (5:1-21)

Now that we have mentioned the three dominant themes of this epistles, I am going to do something that might seem a little strange - instead of following or developing sermons along those lines, I am going to focus on an overriding theme which leaps from the page each time I read this epistle. Regardless of the title or the specific subject of each message, the overriding theme of every message in this series from 1 John is the Assurance of Our Salvation. In light of the budding Gnostic heresy that was invading the church, this assurance was important to the early church. In these Postmodern times when alien philosophies are invading the church at a disturbing rate, we need to glean what we can from 1 John. I might add that true assurance is based on sound doctrine, something that is sadly lacking in this age of easy believism, in a time of moral and philosophical relativism when the only thing many people would condemn is the one who would condemn anything: They are too judgmental! People go to church to be entertained, not to repent; content to leave feeling good, not forgiven.

Now we are hearing things like: It's all about worship, not evangelism; what God wants is worship, not missions. What do you suppose they do with the Great Commission?

Believe me, the message of 1 John is as relevant - and as urgent - for us today as it was for those first readers in the churches of Asia Minor. Our approach in this series will be that of interpretation, illustration, and application. The message is useless if not applicable. Open your Bible and get ready for an unprecedented blessing!

I. JOHN TESTIFIES TO THE VERACITY OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST, 1:1-2.

A. No Living Person Was So Well Qualified to Give Such a Testimony.

1. John was the "beloved disciple" who sat nearest the Lord at the Last Supper.
2. He had outlived all the other Apostles.
3. His apostolic authority was accepted in the churches of Asia Minor.
4. He had been inspired to write the Fourth Gospel.
5. He had been in the Upper Room at Pentecost.
6. He had disciplined many of the leaders of the church at he wrote this epistle.
7. He is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

B. The Letter Was Written to Dispel the Gnostic Heresy.

1. The philosophical Gnostics claimed superior knowledge.

2. They taught that matter was evil and spirit was good.
3. They denied the humanity of Jesus Christ.
4. Docetic Gnostics claimed that Jesus only appeared to be human.
5. Cerinthian Gnostics taught that the spirit descended upon Jesus at Baptism and departed before His death (Spirit could not die).
6. This Greek philosophy was invading the church.
7. The Prologue to the Gospel of John confronts Gnostic claims about Jesus.

C. John Had Intimate Knowledge of Jesus and the Gospel, 1:1a.

1. “That which was from the beginning” denotes the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A similar phrase in the Gospel of John denotes the Second Person of the Trinity Who was with the Father from the beginning of eternity. “That which was from the beginning” is not masculine but neuter, thus the Gospel. John had intimate knowledge of the Gospel from the beginning of the preaching of the Good News. However, there is no way John can separate the Gospel from Jesus Christ.

2. Gnostics Claimed Superior Knowledge, John a Superior Knowledge.

No living person was so well qualified to speak on either the humanity of Jesus Christ as the church’s elder statesman and spokesman, the last apostle. He spoke with apostolic authority and now he is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. His testimony would answer Gnosticism, confront those who were teaching this heresy in the church, and equip the church to deal with the heresy in the future. It was going to get a lot worse before it got any better.

3. The phrase, “from the beginning,” stresses two things.

First, John had had intimate knowledge of the Gospel from the very beginning, having been one of the inner circle of apostles. He was the Lord’s beloved disciple. Had he maintained the same spirit of pride and egotism that earned him and his brother James the title, “sons of thunder,” he might have stressed just how well he had known the Lord, but he is a far different John now. In his humility he seems to want to hide self rather than insert his name in The Gospel which bears his name or in this epistle.

Second, the phrase, “from the beginning” seems to imply a consistency and a stability which should be associated with the

Gospel. Just as God is immutable, so is the Gospel changeless. Now after more than nineteen hundred years we are preaching the same Gospel. Jesus Christ is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8), and the Gospel is the same.

D. Jesus Was Human, Just as the Gospel Proclaims, 1:1b.

1. Jesus was as human as if He had not been divine.
2. He was as divine as if He had not been human.
3. This cannot be said of anyone else who has ever lived.
4. One cannot be saved without knowing the truth.

Jesus is the truth, the greatest testimony to God’s eternal truth. We cannot preach the truth without proclaiming both the humanity and the deity of Jesus Christ.

E. John Defends the Humanity of Jesus, 1:b,c).

1. “Which we have heard” stresses that Jesus was really Human.
2. “Which we have seen with our eyes” demands a physical body.
3. “Which we have looked upon” shows that He was no apparition.
4. “Our hands have handled” nails the door on Gnosticism.
5. “Concerning the Word of life” points to the Author and Subject of the Gospel.

F. John Bears Witness to Jesus Christ, 1:2.

1. The Gospel of life “was manifested” by God.

No man dreamed up the Gospel, no man “founded” the church, and no one invented the Savior. Furthermore, no one could have discovered, or through some superior knowledge comprehended Jesus Christ. No one today can “find” God. No one chooses God. He finds and chooses us.

2. John was one of the witnesses to the Gospel.

“We” stresses that all the early disciples were witnesses to Jesus and to the eternal life He manifested from the Father. The word witness is from the Greek word for martyr. When I was very young in the ministry Mavis Allen, editor of the Outreach Magazine, a Southern Baptist Sunday School (now LifeWay Christian Resources) asked me to write an article on witnessing. I wrote on Acts 1:8, and while Dr. H. Leo Eddleman was writing his commentary on the Book of Acts

I discovered that I had made a mistake. I wrote that Jesus, in Acts 1:8, was restating the Great Commission. Dr. Eddleman, who had been president of New Orleans Seminary when I was a student, had become a close friend over the years. In fact, his father had served as pastor of my home church. J. Edgar Hoover once said that Dr. Leo Eddleman had the best working knowledge of Hebrew of any non-Jew in America. Though identified with Hebrew studies, he has majored in Greek in formal studies. He explained to me that Acts 1:8 is predictive: what Jesus was doing was predicting that His disciples would carry out the Great Commission after they were empowered by the Holy Spirit.

To be a witness was to lay his life on the line for the sake of the Gospel. All the other apostles, according to tradition, had already been martyred for the cause of Christ. John will risk all in order to bear a witness to Jesus Christ. He would be exiled to the Island of Patmos for the sake of the Gospel. There he would be inspired to write (or record) the Revelation. Wouldn't it be interesting to know if the witness he is bearing in this epistle would become a factor in his being exiled to remove him from his office in Ephesus?

II. JOHN REVEALS THE PURPOSE OF THIS EPISTLE, 1:3-4.

A. The First Purpose Is Fellowship, 1:3.

1. The Gospel opens the door to fellowship with other believers, 3a.
2. The Gospel opens the door to fellowship with the father, 3b.

It is absolutely essential that we understand that the word for fellowship here has nothing to do with Cokes and cookies before Sunday School, or Pepsis and Pizzas after church on Sunday night. The Greek word denotes "a participation in," a participation in the Gospel, a participation in the work of the Kingdom of God. We are partners in worship, partners in evangelism, partners in ministry, and yes, even partners in martyrdom.

B. The Epistle Was Written That "Your Joy May Be Full," 1:4.

In my commentary on Philippians, UNDEFEATED! Finding Peace in a World Full of Trouble, I wrote: There is

No joy without peace

No peace without Grace
No Grace without Jesus

CONCLUSION. Jesus was fully human and He was fully divine. Not only did He live, he was seen and heard and touched. Jesus manifested the love of the Father and proclaimed the good news of eternal life through faith in Him. The Gospel answered the Gnostics of the first and second centuries, and it answers all heresies today. If you would have eternal life, you must know Jesus. And the amazing thing is that you do not have to discover Him through some mystic knowledge. Jesus reveals the Father, just as the Holy Spirit works within human hearts to enable us to believe and accept His great salvation.

INVITATION