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1 John 1:1-4

First Message

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THE WORD OF LIFE BECAME FLESH FOR US

SERIES: WHAT GREAT LOVE!

Over the last few months I have become increasingly aware of how popular spirituality has become in our culture today. For all of our devotion to science and technology, many are still seeking a deeper spirituality wherever they can find it.

Sometimes this spiritual quest is purposefully void of God. I read in the Los Angeles Times an article about a church in the city, named the “Church of Beethoven.” The opening paragraph said, “It is a church without preaching, and without prayer. At its Sunday morning services there is something spiritual, all right, but it doesn’t have to do with Allah, or Buddha, or God. Instead, it comes from music, from passionate renditions of works composed by Brahms and Bach and, of course, Beethoven—for whom the church is named.”¹

Many people believe in a vague God fashioned in their own image, giving expression to their own passion and perspective. They are convinced they can find God in many different ways, so they prefer a benign spiritual force that bends to their will rather than a relationship with the righteous and holy God of the Bible.

Driving to lunch the other day I saw an old yet beautiful church building. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I read in very large letters on the outside wall that it was a “Church of Self-Realization.” On their website I learned that it focuses on helping members experience a deeper spiritual connection with the Divine by providing a supportive environment for the practice of meditation and yoga.²

This is sad to me because truth and life is not found there. Without heeding the reliable testament of Scripture the truth becomes flexible. There is no right or wrong, no holy or unholy. God becomes like clay; we can mold him into being whatever we dream up. Without holding fast to the first-hand witnesses to the true nature, character and message of Jesus we can make Christianity anything we want it to be. And so the church becomes clay too. We become free to find meaning and purpose in whatever strikes our fancy. This is dangerous.

This attraction for a more mystical and deeper religious experience can be found not only outside the Church but inside as well. Christians often look for a spiritual high, enticed by the promise of a mountaintop experience. A flow of ministries come my way via phone calls or emails touting a brand new Christian curriculum or event that will super-charge my spiritual walk or set me on fire for God. Some of these ministries are wonderful, yet with others the message is clear: who I am in Christ and what I have in him is not enough. Jesus is not

enough. The Bible is not enough. I need something better. I need something more.

In this sea of ambiguity many of us are filled with uncertainty and confusion about our spiritual standing. If we share our faith at all, we share it timidly and without conviction. Is that you? If so, I don’t want you to be discouraged or defeated. I want you to join me as we hear from the Lord in the first letter of John.

The letter was written to Christians who faced the same kind of environment and had the same questions we have. Though this letter has no heading or introductory greeting, both tradition and scholarship agree that 1st, 2nd and 3rd John were written by John the apostle. Though he was quite old at the time of this writing, nearing the end of his life, he was still in the fight for the faith. We are not told to whom he wrote this letter, but most consider it a circular letter to be read to the various churches he pastored in and around Ephesus.

Within the body of this letter John gives at least two main reasons for writing it. First, he wants to protect his flock from following a growing and dangerous false teaching. In 2:26 he says, “I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.” A certain group of individuals who began to believe a false doctrine had left the fellowship of the church and were trying to persuade other members to do the same.

It seems this false teaching was an early form of what has come to be known as Gnosticism. These early Gnostics regarded the teaching of John and the apostles as inadequate. They believed that an additional and superior knowledge, or *gnosis*, was necessary for true life with God.

A primary tenet of their belief was that flesh or matter is at best of no importance and at worst evil. They considered only that which is spirit to be truly good, so they denied that Jesus could be fully God and fully man. The incarnate and historical Jesus Christ was no longer occupying the central place of their faith. Instead, they were looking to inspired spiritual experiences that lifted them above the conventional views of Jesus as expressed by John. This led to all sorts of trouble. These false teachers brought a great deal of uncertainty and confusion among the churches, so John confronts their assertion head-on at the beginning of his letter.

The second reason John writes this letter can be found in 5:13, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of

the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

John wants his readers, who are already believers in Christ, to be confident about their own Christian standing and have a deep assurance of their eternal life through the Lord. John exposes the error of these false teachers, reminding his flock that they need no new revelation to enjoy the mercy, grace, forgiveness and eternal life found in Jesus Christ.

As we take a close look at the composition of this letter we should remember that John, alongside his brother James, had been fishermen who had left their nets to follow Jesus. They were men of the outdoors. As Jesus spent time with them he gave them the nickname “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17). We don’t know exactly what that means, but I feel that neither of these brothers was timid or soft-spoken. They roared through life, ready for action and unafraid to speak their minds.

But John had a warm and sensitive side too. Love is a prominent theme in his writings, and in his gospel he consistently refers to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”

So it is no great surprise that John writes with a great deal of emotion and passion. He uses language that is both feisty and affectionate. He speaks from the heart, and so this letter is a free-flowing expression of his convictions. He repeats himself often, returning to the same themes to make sure he has made his point clearly.

Above all, John is a pastor. He has a heart to feed and protect the flock under his care. He wants to help them grow in their faith and live out with integrity their calling as Christians. He desires for them to be rooted and grounded in love for God and one another, resting on the firm foundation of the nature of Jesus Christ. His message is as vitally important to us as it was to his original readers.

Let’s take a look at the opening verses which set the stage for the remainder of the letter. First, we’ll look at the content of the message, and second, the purpose.

The content of the message: The life appeared

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. (1 John 1:1-2 TNIV)

In just a few lines, John captures the heart of the gospel. The “Word of life,” the Son of God who existed eternally with God from the beginning, appeared in history in human flesh. The life of faith begins with this essential truth: Jesus Christ is both God and man.

John refers to Jesus as the “life” three times in just two verses. He is eager to make the point that eternal life is not the result of some new enlightenment or knowledge acquired

mystically. No matter what other religious teachers or charismatic individuals might say, true life, the kind of eternal and abundant life that comes from God, can only be found in Jesus Christ. The core of our Christian faith is not found in a system of thought, or adherence to a set of rules, or in some nebulous self-awakening, but in the person and work of Jesus Christ, Son of God.

John speaks about Jesus not as a distant observer but as a first-hand witness. The incarnation was personal. Notice how he says that Jesus appeared “to us.” It was “our eyes” that saw Jesus, and “our hands” that touched him.

When John mentions that Jesus was both “seen” and “looked at,” we might think he is simply repeating himself. But the word translated “looked at” implies intently examining something. Jesus was much more than casually seen around town. He was scrutinized in detail.

The other day, after enjoying a hug with my daughter Olivia, she said, “Dad, you’ve got a lot of grey hair. You’re getting old. We should call you geezer, like grandpa.” Olivia didn’t just see me, she really looked at me. She was close enough to examine me and see the grey hairs on my head. Thanks, Olivia!

John was close to Jesus, seeing him work and weep and pray. He saw his miraculous power too. He was there at the wedding in Cana and saw Jesus turn water into wine. He witnessed first-hand how Jesus healed the invalid at the Pool of Bethesda and brought sight to the man born blind near the Pool of Siloam. John was with Jesus when he fed over 5,000 people with just a handful of loaves and fish. With his own eyes he saw Jesus walk on the water. With his own ears he heard Jesus quiet the stormy sea. John was there when Jesus said, “Lazarus, come out!” He saw his dead friend rise from the tomb.

You can see and hear people from a distance, but to touch them you must be very close. Touching brings a sense of intimacy, and Jesus initiated and welcomed such intimacy before and after his resurrection.

John was with the disciples, hiding away in fear after the crucifixion, when Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” (Luke 24:36-39)

Jesus was not a figment of John’s imagination. He was not a ghost or phantom from a dream. He was not some kind of myth, fable or legend. He was rooted and grounded in history. There were eyewitnesses to his birth, baptism, miracles, death and resurrection. John and the other disciples were with Jesus in his public and private moments, morning, noon and night. There was no way to fool anyone as to who Jesus truly was. If there were anything that could contradict his righteous character or claim to be the Son of God, those who were with him and those who were against him would have seen it and exposed it.

John states without equivocation that Jesus Christ was a real man and nothing less than God incarnate. He personally witnessed, as did others also, the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ.

It's interesting to note that John chooses two different words to describe the way he communicates the reality and significance of the incarnation. As an eyewitness, John had the authority to personally testify that the Word of life became flesh, and as a disciple he was commissioned by Christ to proclaim the gospel.

In Mark 16:15 we hear Jesus tell his disciples, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation." What John experienced, and what he was given, he did not keep to himself. What he received he passed on to others that they too might receive the good news. John goes on to make it clear that his proclamation of the nature of Jesus Christ was not an end in itself. His message has an ongoing purpose.

Purpose of the message: Fellowship resulting in joy

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. We write this to make our joy complete. (1:3-4)

John says that the truth of Jesus Christ is not merely factual information to dispense, but life-giving good news. The purpose of John's proclamation was not that his readers would have greater knowledge, but that together with him they would experience greater fellowship and deeper joy with God and each other.

The message John proclaims is good news to all creation, because the fellowship he experienced with Jesus continued and deepened with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit was not limited to just the apostles. It is extended to each and every generation.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus expressed this beautifully in his prayer for his disciples and for us, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20-21). Intimate communion with God and each other is available to all who believe in Jesus Christ.

In the coming weeks we'll take a closer look at what our fellowship with each other is to look like. But John begins his letter by saying that we have no true Christian fellowship unless we have fellowship with God first.

One commentator describes it this way: "Fellowship is not just the coincidence of a shared experience of God, where we compare our private spiritual walks; it is living and experiencing the Father and the Son together as believers. Christian fellowship is triangular: my life in fellowship with Christ, your

life in fellowship with Christ, and my life in fellowship with yours."³

I experienced first-hand this kind of fellowship this past weekend when I was part of a team that traveled to Mexicali to visit with and minister alongside our Mexican brothers and sisters in Christ. My heart is full from the love we shared. Our mutually shared love not only knit us to each other, it also increased our appreciation for our God, who is alive and present among us.

We worked together and played together. We shared baseball, soccer, music, crafts, piñatas and tamales. But most significantly, we shared fellowship with God together. Our fellowship was deep and full of tremendous joy. We shared that joy not only with each other, but with God as well.

This is also true for a congregation like ours that enjoys such cultural diversity. I've seen it in action in the various home fellowship groups. We are different in many ways, but our differences are small in comparison to the great treasure we have in common. The power of Christian fellowship transcends our cultural differences. Though we may not have been born in the same country, or grew up speaking the same language. Our common bond is that we share the same mercy and grace of our Heavenly Father, the same salvation of Christ, and the same indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

This message from John concerning the Word of life constitutes the basis for the fellowship we share. The incarnation is the central doctrine of our Christian faith. Embracing Jesus and continuing to bear witness to him is at the center of our lives together.

It is easy to think that Gnosticism was just a first-century phenomenon that we are not confronted with in our time. However, many teachings abound today that have a distinctly Gnostic flavor. As you are confronted with these various worldly philosophies, ideologies and religions promising a unique path to God, be mindful of what they say about Jesus Christ. Many say that they are not against the teaching of the Bible and of Jesus, but they discount the true nature of Jesus Christ.

Any teaching that waters down either Jesus' divinity or humanity must be rejected. Without Jesus Christ taking on human flesh, laying down his life and paying the price for our sins, there is no saving power in the cross, no resurrection, no forgiveness and no salvation. John's opening words in this letter ought to reaffirm our Christian faith. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18).

We cannot add to or subtract from the message of the gospel to try and make it more palatable, more respectable or more exciting. If we do that, we end up believing a delusion and we have no foundation for true fellowship with God or each other. Jesus Christ is eternal life. There is no other means

by which we may be saved. This life brings fellowship and joy that we are called upon to share.

John's message to the world is our message as well. We too are called to proclaim the good news and "be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pet 3:15). John is not calling for arrogance, but confidence and boldness. The person and the message we proclaim is good news, life-changing news, so we share not out of duty but out of love.

I am often timid to proclaim the good news, mainly because I am so aware of my own shortcomings and sin. Henri Nouwen has encouraged me with his words:

People will constantly try to hook your wounded self. They will point out your needs, your character defects, your limitations and sins. That is how they attempt to dismiss what God, through you, is saying to them. Your temptation, arising from your great insecurity and doubt, is to begin believing their definition of you. But God has called you to speak the Word to the world and to speak it fearlessly. While acknowledging your woundedness, do not let go of the truth that lives in you and demands to be spoken.⁴

Our message is not our own, it is given to us to share with others. We are not called to testify or proclaim anything but what we have personally experienced. We can share boldly because we have the reliable testimony of Scripture, the indwelling presence of the Spirit, and our own personal experience of fellowship with God. We don't have to memorize the four spiritual laws booklet or any other formula, but humbly and transparently express the love and life of Christ within us.

There is now and always has been a thirst within each of us for God. Where are we to find satisfaction for our thirst? Does it really matter what we believe? Can't we all know God in our own way and each find our own path to him? John states emphatically that Jesus Christ, the Word of life, eternal Son of God, is the only means by which we have fellowship with God and one another. All other gods are false. All other religions lead down a wrong path.

As the old hymn says,
Whom have we Lord but Thee,
Soul thirst to satisfy,
Exhaustless spring! The waters free!
All other streams are dry.⁵

Are you feeling spiritually dry? Are you feeling distant from God? Then the question before you is, From what stream are you drawing life? Is it your friends, or your family, or your job? Are you caught up in trying to find the latest thing or the newest adventure?

If so, I want you to hear and remember these words of John. Faith in Jesus Christ is not an impersonal and hollow doctrine. Jesus is life. The same resurrection power that brought him to the right hand of God is available to you and me.

For those of you who already know Christ, it is my hope and prayer that you will not seek to quench your thirst elsewhere and be led astray into a false teaching. May you hold fast to your faith and find assurance of your eternal and abundant life in Jesus Christ. May his life embolden you to proclaim this good news, and may you experience great joy in your fellowship with God and one another.

For those of you who do not know God, who have not put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, it is my hope that you will let the Word of life take root in your heart and enter into fellowship with him. The Scriptures state clearly, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). What wonderful news! We are hopeless and dead in our sin, but the gift of God is eternal life in his Son Jesus Christ. May I invite you to receive that gift?

1. Kate Linthicum, "Cathedral for joyful noise," Los Angeles Times, December 27, 2009, page A3.

2. www.anandapaloalto.org

3. Gary M. Burge; *The NIV Application Commentary: The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 55.

4. Henri Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love* (New York: Doubleday, First Image Books, 1998), 99.

5. A.S. Ormsby, *Alone with God; or, Life Lessons Learned in Solitude* (London: Yapp and Hawkins, 1874), 195.