

**“ETERNAL LIFE MADE MANIFEST”**

First John is one of what are sometimes referred to as the New Testament's "Catholic Epistles." This does not have anything to do with the Roman Catholic Church, though. In this context the term "catholic" carries its more general meaning, as it does in the parts of the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed where we say we believe in the holy catholic church. "Catholic" simply means "universal." These letters are considered catholic because, unlike the letters written by the apostle Paul, they were not originally addressed to a particular church or person. While John was certainly writing with certain recipients in mind, he does not specifically address his letter to the church in Rome, or Corinth, or Colossae, or any other locale. Most likely, John wrote this as a circular letter to the churches in the region of Asia Minor, the same churches who were the recipients of the book of Revelation. The author is the same John who was a disciple of Jesus and the author of the fourth Gospel. First John was written near the end of John's life, during the last decade or so of the first century. Along with 2 and 3 John and the book of Revelation, it was one of the last New Testament books to have been written.

John wrote this letter in order to confront a heresy that was stirring up trouble in the late first-century church. And John confronted this heresy by showing his readers what true Christianity looks like in a person's life. This is the main theme of 1 John: the tests of genuine Christianity. John wants us to have a sound basis of assurance for our salvation. This is what he says near the end of the letter, where he writes, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you

have eternal life.” [5:13] First John is about assurance of salvation. In these five chapters, John repeatedly sets forth three tests that we should use to test the genuineness of our faith. There is the test of sound doctrine, the test of godly living, and the test of love. As I said, John mentions these tests over and over again, and for this reason the structure of this letter is more like a symphony than a logical argument. As in a symphony, John introduces his themes at the beginning and then returns to them and develops them again and again throughout the book.

In this opening passage of the letter, John says that the original apostolic message, which is validated by eyewitness testimony, is that eternal life has been made manifest in the incarnate Christ. This is the main idea of the text we are studying this morning: John is bearing eyewitness testimony to Christ, the word of life, and he is doing so in order that others might know the joy of having fellowship with the living God.

One of the things that stands out when we begin to look at this passage is the unconventional nature of John's grammar. We expect to find a main subject and verb near the beginning of a sentence, but in this passage they do not appear until the middle of verse 3. In other words, the first two and a half verses of the letter describe the direct object of John's opening sentence. This tells us something about what John is trying to convey here, and it is not very difficult to see what it is. Look at the passage again and ask yourself what John seems to be directing our attention to? He clearly wants us to focus our attention upon what he is proclaiming. He wants us to focus upon Christ and his gospel.

Let's take a few moments to consider how these first two and a half verses describe what John is proclaiming. First of all, it is interesting that John refers to the object of his preaching in an impersonal manner. We might expect him to use a personal pronoun, to say "*He* who was from the beginning" or "*The One who* was from the beginning," but instead he uses a relative pronoun, which is correctly translated as "*That which* was from the beginning." Now why would John do this? He is certainly not denying the personal nature of Christ. As one of Jesus' original disciples John knew firsthand that Jesus was an actual person. He knew that Jesus is the Son of God in human flesh. John stresses this by repeatedly saying that he heard and saw and touched Jesus. The reason why John uses impersonal language to refer to Jesus is because he is not only talking about the person of Jesus but about his gospel as well. He is proclaiming both Christ and the message about Christ. The two are bound together. As one commentator puts it, "The message takes concrete form in [Christ]." [Marshall, 102]

The next thing to point out is that John says that Jesus is the one who "was from the beginning." That word "beginning" brings to mind two other important biblical passages: Genesis 1:1, where it says, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth"; and John 1:1, where it says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." By calling our attention to those passages, John is telling us that Jesus existed as God from the very beginning and that his coming into the world stands out as the central event in history. The One who existed from the beginning, the One through whom all things were made, this One took on our flesh and blood and

entered into the world in order to bring life to us. It was the most monumental event in world history. And John is writing this letter to tell us about it.

It is easy to see that John wants to emphasize the fact that Jesus really did come into this world in the flesh. John says that he heard Jesus, that he saw him with his own eyes, and that he touched him with his hands. Seven times in these four verses John mentions his sensory experience of Jesus. This is important because John, along with the other apostles, was an eyewitness of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. The apostolic testimony serves as the foundation upon which Christ is building his church. As the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 2:20, the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone."

The reason why John places so much of an emphasis upon his eyewitness experience of Jesus is because of the nature of the heresy that he was confronting as he wrote to the churches of Asia Minor. We learn in 2 John that these churches were dealing with false teachers who were denying that Jesus had truly come in the flesh. This heresy is now referred to as "docetism," a type of Gnosticism that views matter as inherently evil and says that it would have been impossible for the Son of God to have actually taken on human flesh. Docetism says that Jesus only appeared to have a body. The body that suffered on the cross was not really the body of the Son of God. Jesus the man, the historical Jesus, was not really that important. That is what the false teachers were saying. And John responds to this heresy by emphasizing that he was an eyewitness of the incarnate Son of God.

In verses 1-2, John refers to Jesus as “the word of life,” as “the life,” and as “the eternal life.” This is extremely significant, because, apart from Jesus Christ, each and every one of us is dead in sin. Our sin has separated us from God, the One who is the author and giver of life. It has brought the wrath and curse of God upon us. Apart from Christ, we are under the tyranny of death. But John tells us that when Jesus came into the world, “the life was made manifest.” This reminds us of the opening of John’s Gospel, where he writes: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” [Jn. 1:4] And later on in the Gospel of John, just before Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, he says to Lazarus’ sister Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” [Jn. 11:25-26] And then a few chapters after that, Jesus says to his disciple Thomas: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” [Jn. 14:6] John wants us to see that life is found in Jesus. As the eternal Son of God, as the Word through which all things were made, Jesus Christ has life in himself. He is the true God and eternal life. He is the source and substance of life. If we want to have life, we have to come to him. We have to receive him. He came into the world, taking on our flesh and blood, in order to break the power of death, in order to restore us to life with God. As Calvin writes, “When Christ is preached to us, the kingdom of heaven is opened to us, so that being raised from death we may live the life of God.” Jesus came in order that we might know the joy of having life with God. John is saying

that this life, this free gift of eternal life, has been made manifest, it has been revealed in the historical person of Jesus Christ. And it is to this life that John bears witness.

I do not think we reflect enough on what a blessing it is for us to live as God's people after the coming of Christ. God's promise of eternal life has been made fully known to us. It has been fully revealed to all who hear and receive the glorious gospel of Christ. God had promised this eternal life to his people in ages past, but now it has been made manifest in Christ. Herein lies the difference between us and the saints of the Old Testament era. We hold in our hands the One whom they could only grasp in shapes and shadows. What a privilege we have! What a blessing!

John says that his goal in preaching this message about the word of life is that we might enjoy the blessing of having fellowship with God. Notice that John mentions both the Father and the Son in verse 3. It seems that the heretics against whom he was writing were denying the necessity of having faith in Christ in order to know God. This is indicated in chapter 2, where John writes,

“Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also.” [2:22-23]

And notice what John says at the end of the letter:

“And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.” [5:20]

The point could not be made any more clear. The only way that anyone can have fellowship with the one true God is through faith in Jesus Christ. There is no salvation apart from Christ. Jesus is the word of life.

One of the things that we can learn from this passage is that the proclamation of the gospel message is foundational to a life of communion with God. Doctrine is a prerequisite for genuine spiritual experience. Sound Christian experience is based upon sound Christian doctrine. Listen to how this is expressed by J. Gresham Machen as he reflects upon the nature of the church's creeds. He writes,

“The creeds of Christendom are not expressions of Christian experience. They are summary statements of what God has told us in His Word. Far from the subject matter of the creeds being derived from Christian experience, it is Christian experience which is based upon the truth contained in the creeds.” [*God Transcendent*, 158]

There is a lot of talk nowadays about having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And John is certainly addressing the relational nature of the Christian faith when he

writes about having fellowship with God. But he also makes it clear that the only way to enjoy this fellowship is by receiving the apostolic message about Christ. If you cultivate a relationship with God without seeking to know him through what he has revealed in his Word, you will end up having fellowship with a god of your own imagining instead of the God of the Bible.

Notice also that John does not just speak about having fellowship with God, but about having fellowship with one another as well. John says that he proclaims his message “so that you too may have fellowship with us.” Here is another important reminder for contemporary Christians. It confronts our temptation to be non-churchly in our thinking about what it means to be a Christian. Being a Christian means having fellowship with Christ's church. It means being a part of the body of Christ. You cannot be a Christian on your own any more than an arm can be a body on its own. The word “fellowship” means sharing something in common. It means sharing in the grace of God with other believers. We partake of Christ together, not on our own. This is one of the things that we are reminded of when we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The bread that we break is a joint participation in the body of Christ. The cup that we drink is a joint participation in the blood of Christ. This is why we do not celebrate the Lord's Supper on our own. We hold Christ in common. Together, we draw life from him.

The last thing that John says in this passage is that he is writing these things in order that his joy might be complete. His desire for others to be drawn into fellowship with God in Christ is so great that his joy will not be complete unless others come to share in

the eternal life that he proclaims. Here we see the heart of a true pastor for his flock. He wants them to find their greatest joy in knowing Christ. He wants this so much that his joy will not be complete apart from it. And this is something that is true for every Christian. Your joy in Christ will expand more and more when you seek to draw others into the fellowship that you have with Christ and his people.

Here is John's point in this passage: Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, the One who existed from before the beginning of time, the One through whom the worlds were made, this Jesus really has entered into human history. He really has humbled himself, taking upon himself a body just like ours, a body that could be seen and touched, a body that could suffer and die. And he did this so that we might participate in the life that he has in himself. He did it so that we could have abundant life, eternal life, by having fellowship with him. This is the life that is offered to you when you hear the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed. Take hold of it by faith, and never let it go.