

# Life, Life, Eternal Life

*1 John: Fellowship with God*

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**Bible Text:** 1 John 1:1-4

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## **First Presbyterian Church**

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*Our heavenly Father, truly all blessings come from you. We thank you that in Jesus Christ you have filled us with blessings: the knowledge of the Lord, peace, the forgiveness of our sins, the transformation of our lives, a taste and indeed desire for the words that come to us from your mouth in the pages of Scripture. We thank you for the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ who has opened our eyes to see our need of him and his all-sufficiency to be our Savior here and hereafter. And we thank you for the way in which he has brought us to you so that we come to you as children to their heavenly Father. So we say, Father, watch over us; Father, feed us; Father, direct us; Father, correct us; Father, transform us. Most of all, Father, as you speak to us, make us conscious of how great your love for us is and so we look to you to lead us and to teach us from your word. We pray this in Jesus our Savior's name. Amen.*

Please be seated.

For our Scripture lesson this morning, we are turning to the first letter of John which you will find in the Pew Bible and a copy of that Bible will be in the rack in front of you or in the seat beside you, page 1,021. For our children who have their Children's Bible, the passage is on page 1,521 and just as a little hint, you may find it easier to turn from the back rather than from the front of your Bible, boys and girls, to find page 1,521. All of this underlining for us that our Children's Bibles have 50% more pages than the Bibles that most of us carry and in this way, we're not only building our children up spiritually but we are building our children up physically as they bring those big red Bibles to church Sunday by Sunday.

We're beginning to read at 1 John 1 and the first four verses.

“1 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 - 2 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 - 3 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. 4 And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”

This Sunday, we're beginning a new series of studies in this book entitled 1 John. It's actually in my own view, one of the most unusual parts of the New Testament. For one thing, there isn't any real indication in 1 John that it is a letter at all. It doesn't begin as the rest of the New Testament letters do with an identification of the author and of the readers and some words of greeting and it doesn't sign off the way New Testament letters tend to do. In some ways, it reads more like a sermon. An unusual sermon, but a sermon nonetheless. It may be, I haven't tried to do this, it may be that 1 John is actually sermon length but then of course, that depends on who is preaching the sermon. But it is classified among the letters of the New Testament. If so, it's a very unusual letter.

Perhaps even more striking is the fact, and you would pick this up even from the reading of the first four verses, it has a very unusual style. So unusual is the style of this little book that New Testament students and scholars rack their brains to try to work out how do you break down this letter into its component parts so that it seems to move forward the way other New Testament letters do. It doesn't have anything of the style of the Apostle Paul, for example, as we've seen in Ephesians these Sunday evenings, of laying out Christian doctrine and then applying that doctrine to Christian living. The author doesn't seem to think or speak or write in exactly that straight line fashion and sometimes it's difficult to see how it is that he moves from one theme to another theme.

About 35 years ago, I think, maybe it was 25 years ago. When you get to this age, what's ten years here or there? We happened to be talking about this letter at home and my wife who instructs me in many things said, “You need to remember that this was written by a very elderly man.” You don't find that in the textbooks, incidentally, you find that only in my wife. But as soon as she said it, I thought, “I think that's it.” When God's Spirit uses the writers of Scripture to give us sacred Scripture, he doesn't ignore their personalities or their ages or their literary styles or their experience. Actually, if you were to read these opening verses again or try to hear them being read by a very elderly person, I think you would immediately catch the sense that this is often how elderly people speak. Strangely enough, I thought about one or two of our most elderly elders but they are so bright in mind that they would not sound like an old man if I had asked them to read this passage of Scripture today.

But it does have some of the characteristics of the way elderly people, perhaps even struggling for breath at times, not as quick minded as they used to be is how they sometimes speak about, “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.” You can always imagine, I suppose, if John had preached this as a sermon that some of the bright spirited and quick-witted youngsters were saying, “Will you just get to the point.” But when we have patience with John and follow through what he is saying, we catch a sense that he is actually drawing us into an atmosphere that we ourselves have rarely visited. There is a maturity of speech. There is

especially a maturity of love and experience of the Lord Jesus Christ and of the knowledge of God that runs through this whole letter.

So, it seems to me that this letter bears many of the characteristics of a very old Christian writing to young Christians but it also bears the mark of this elderly Christian writing to his fellow believers as his own spiritual family. If you read quickly through 1 John, you'll notice that almost like punctuation marks he almost always alternates between saying, "Now beloved, do you see this?" Or in that beautiful term of endearment that he so frequently uses, "Children. My children. Little children, do you see this?" So, in this marvelous way, John is speaking to his family. He is their great grandfather in Christ. Indeed, in chapter 2, he addresses them this way, verse 12, "I am writing to you, little children"; I am writing to you, fathers; I'm writing to you, children; I am writing to you, fathers. And you have the sense, something that some of us, many of us in this congregation can appreciate, that he is the great patriarch. Many of his fellow apostles are no longer here. Some of them have paid the ultimate price of being a Christian and now, as it were, he is gathering his spiritual children and grandchildren, great grandchildren around himself and he is taking them through some of the wonders and blessings of the gospel.

Yet, interestingly, you don't always remember to do this when you get old, interestingly, he actually makes it clear why he's writing. Do you remember how in John 20 towards the end of the gospel, we are told why the gospel was written, "In order that we might come to faith in Jesus Christ?" When John comes near to the end of his letter, he explains to us why it is that he is writing this letter. He says in verse 13 of chapter 5, "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." In other words, one of his undergirding concerns is that these Christians will enjoy a stability in their faith in an unstable world, that they will enjoy the assurance of salvation in a world that is full of difficulties and trials for them.

Indeed, there are themes that he keeps coming around to that emphasize this. He calls them to walk in the light of God in a world that is full of darkness. He tells them how conscious he is that they need to keep to the truth in a world that is full of lies and falsehood. That they need to be devoted to Jesus Christ in a world that is full of antichrist. That they need to live by God's grace as those who express genuine, heartfelt, practical love for one another in a world whose love is superficial and towards the people of Jesus Christ, often hateful.

So, his concern, like so many of his fellow apostles, his concern is to build up the people of God and in building them up, he has an eye to this: that he wants these Christians to stand out in the world as different from the world, as able to take the pressures of the world and instead of crumbling in their faith, actually to go and grow stronger in their faith. He's very conscious of the obstacles that there are. Many of them come from the outside. He says later on this letter, "The whole world lies in the evil one and you need to understand it."

There are also influences around and invading the church, he sees, that could destroy the gospel and, therefore, destroy their assurance of salvation and, therefore, destroy their witness for the Lord Jesus Christ. So, he's drawing them in, in a world in which it was becoming increasingly difficult to be a Christian believer. False teaching on the one hand, persecution on the other. He believes that he is able to teach them in such a way that by God's grace, they will be radically different from the world around them and stable in their Christian faith, enjoying a great measure of assurance of eternal life.

Of course, that's a key issue, isn't it? If you don't really enjoy assurance of eternal life, you're not going to be very able for the pressures of this world. This world will seem larger and greater than that world. Preferable to that world. When a Christian believer enjoys the kind of assurance that John is speaking about here, then he or she begins to be able to see this world in its true light and that world, for its real glory.

In these opening verses, John is doing exactly this: he is facing the situation that he knows these young Christians, some of them untested, are in and he is asking himself and answering the question, so what do I say to them? So what do you say to them? What is your modus operandi when you meet Christians who are under pressure? What do you say to them? What do you write to them about? Friends perhaps in some other country where Christians are persecuted? Where the church is in difficulty? What do you say when you write to them?

One of the most amazing things for us 21<sup>st</sup> century people is that that was characteristic of the situation of all the people to whom the apostles were writing and there isn't a New Testament letter that begins by saying, "I'm so sorry you're having these problems." No, what John does here and it's very evident in these verses, is first of all to point his beloved readers to the glorious privileges of the gospel and especially to the greatness of Jesus Christ. These words are rather reminiscent, aren't they, of the opening verses of John's gospel. We don't actually find out the identity of the subject of the discussion until we're well into the passage.

Have we ever noticed that? It's actually difficult to notice that because we're so familiar with the prologue to John's gospel. We all know it's about Jesus but you're ages on in the prologue to John's gospel before John actually says, "I'm actually talking about Jesus here." All this about the Word and who the Word was and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Without him nothing was made that was made. Well, who is this? Well, this is Jesus. And you notice that John does something similar here, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, looked upon, touched with our hands, concerning the word of life." It's a message. It's a word.

But what he wants us to see is that when it comes to the gospel message, the message is a person. It's not just words, it's *the* word. It's not just a message, but the message is a person. Jesus himself. We saw and we touched and we handled. I wonder if he's thinking there about that incident described at the end of John's gospel where Thomas had said, "Well, I'll not believe unless I can reach out and touch." He didn't know Jesus was listening. Actually, people don't usually know Jesus is listening but he's listening all the

time. He's listening all the time and so he appears in the room a week later and he says to Thomas, "Reach out and touch. Put your own words into action."

John is saying, "We did touch him." Isn't that something? "We touched Jesus." Later on, that's going to be a hugely important thing. He could actually touch Jesus. You could touch Jesus. He was real skin and bones, flesh and blood. He was a real man. Real flesh and blood. But what he's wanting to say here, isn't it, is, "Do you know who this Jesus is? He is the Jesus who was with the Father from the beginning. He is the Jesus who was made manifest in the Incarnation. He was the Jesus we touched and rubbed shoulders with and now he's the Jesus who crucified and buried and raised and ascended and seated at the right hand of God. That's the Jesus that we have preached to you and because you have listened to that preaching and the Spirit has worked in your life, by God's grace, you have been brought to faith and this is your greatest privilege of all, that you have come to know Jesus Christ and that this Jesus Christ came among us."

That was thrilling to him. I ask myself that question constantly, "Is this thrilling to me or don't I really understand the gospel at all? Is this commonplace to me? Is this Christianity, church, religion, America, the Western world, civilization?" Of course, he came and was manifested. Of course, he did that. Why wouldn't he do that? "O no," the Apostle John says, "I can never get over this. I'm an old man. I've seen everything. I've had friends who have been taken and crucified. There's nothing in the world I haven't seen but I've never seen anything that causes me to wonder as much as this causes me to wonder. That the Son of God who was in the presence of the heavenly Father, face-to-face with the heavenly Father in a world of majesty and glory and purity and worship and absolute perfection, should come into this world for the likes of me." That's what makes all the difference, that the privilege of it dawns on people. That's what happens in revival, actually, whether it's personal revival or corporate revival. The truth of the message dawns upon people and they say, "How can this possibly be? For me? For the likes of me?" So, as soon as it becomes old news, same old same old, Jesus Christ, no thrill in my soul, I'm dead in the waters spiritually, aren't I?

So, he begins in this way, no words of introduction. None of your literary touches. None of your Roman eloquence. None of your principles of rhetoric. He begins by saying, "It's all about Jesus and who he is and how he came and how we knew him and what he did for us and how we brought that message to you." The privileges of it all. Then, of course, he is conscious as he looks on the church in which he is serving. How readily we lose our sense of privilege, do we not? How readily we lose our sense of privilege. Do you think you and I would live the way we do if the privilege of this had gripped our minds and thrilled our souls?

And you see this old man, hardly strength to speak, but he's with Wesley, isn't he?

"Happy if with my latest breath,  
I might but gasp his name."

And his deepest concern is that these dear Christians, whom he's watching, for whom he's praying, for whom he has a care, that they might have that glorious sense of privilege as well. He wants them to meditate on this. He wants this to seep into their thinking and then into their hearts and into their affections and into their wills. What more glorious privilege in all the world could there possibly be than that the Son of God has been made manifest and I've come to know him and the word of the gospel has come to me? That changes absolutely everything. That puts everything else into its proper place in life.

So, however old he is, he wants to get this message out to his beloved young Christians and he points them to the privileges that they've had. "That which we have seen and heard," verse 3, "we proclaim also to you." Those of you who are older, you understand him as you think about your grandchildren or your great grandchildren or young people in the church and you have a care for them. Isn't this your passion? That they might know the Lord in this way? And their being thrilled to be Christians in a world like this?

Then you see that he goes on from speaking about the wonderful privileges in verse 3 and 4, he speaks about the wonderful effects it has. He says, here's the first thing, "You have fellowship with us. You have fellowship with us." Do you see what he's saying? He's saying next to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, the second greatest privilege in the world we have is our fellowship with one another. Isn't that right? Isn't this the gospel? Isn't this why Christ died? In order to have a church? So that we could have fellowship with one another? But nothing natural creates. This isn't the kind of fellowship that you get by playing a sport together, although that has its own benefits and enjoyments. This is the kind of fellowship in which people who naturally would never know one another or have a taste for one another, are brought together in their common love for and trust in, the Lord Jesus Christ so that it doesn't matter where you go in the world, it's true. You go to Africa or India or China. You go to Korea. You go to France or Germany or Switzerland. You go to Latin America or across the border, I mean, into Canada or even just across the Mason-Dixon Line and you find there are brothers and sisters in Christ and there is a bond that's created and you know you belong to this world-wide community about which we have just been praying, this eternity long family. There is nothing in the world to compare to it. There is nothing in the world so glorious as it.

So, when we're Christians, we're utterly addicted to it. Do you remember how Luke in Luke 2, when he describes the church, says that? He says, "These early Christians, they had some glorious addictions. They were addicted to the fellowship." You know what he's doing there? That's one of those places where Luke presses the "pause" button and says, "If you want to know what a church full with the Holy Spirit looks like, this is what it looks like." The people have an addiction to one another. It is utterly essential to growing in the Christian life that you and I have that addiction because incidentally, if we don't have that addiction, there are all kinds of other addictions that will run in and take its place and none of them will do us what we think they will do for us.

So the question is: if the glory of knowing Jesus Christ is that the first impact it makes on me is that I'm brought into this family of God, do you have that addiction, my friend? This isn't the same thing as having your name on a piece of paper somewhere in the

archives of a Christian church somewhere. This is about being addicted to your fellow Christians because the New Testament knows nothing about living the Christian life without this addiction. One of the signs that you've got it is what? What's the sign of addiction? You want more of it. So, by God's grace in the work of the fellowship, in the worship of the fellowship, in the prayer of the fellowship, we simply want more of it and the great thing about this addiction is God will give you more of it until sometimes you might go home on a Sunday night having been blessed by the fellowship of God's people saying to yourself, "I don't think it can get any better and if it gets better, I don't know if I'll be able to contain it." Then the Lord says, "You're only beginning, Pal."

You wonder, why was it, without all this stuff, that the contemporary Christian church possesses in spades, why was it that this little community in Jerusalem and in all these other places made such a massive impact on the world? It was because there was a fellowship there that nothing in this world can possibly hope to imitate and John is saying, "That's one of the blessings. That's one of the blessings of knowing the Word of life, knowing the Lord Jesus Christ, that you're brought into this fellowship."

I may have told you before of an occasion where I was standing with an elder in another church, a large church, as they were receiving members and he turned to me and he said, "Don't you think this is the greatest church in all the world?" I was glad he said it. I rejoiced. I did what I usually do when I don't agree with people, I just made a noise and people think, "Well, that's what they must do in Scotland. Maybe he agrees or maybe he doesn't agree." But I'll tell you what I was thinking, I was thinking, "No, it's the church I belong to that's the greatest church in the world," and not because I belong to it but because I wouldn't want to belong to any other church than the church I thought was the greatest church in the world because the Lord Jesus had put me into that church, to fellowship in that church, to love these people, to be brothers and sisters together, to help one another along, to make an impact on our society strengthened by one another. Well, have you ever tasted that addiction? That you want more? Every Christian by God's grace may be able to say, "I think the greatest church in the world to be in is the church to which I belong because that's where the Lord Jesus has put me and these are the people he's put me alongside."

Now, in his Providence, he may move us on, of course, but you know, people of this addiction don't church hop, do they? Because they love the church. Because Jesus loved the church and gave himself for the church, warts and all. That's our blessing, isn't it? Many of us feel that, don't we? Many of us love our church family because we love our church family. It's not that we're somehow or another superior to any other church family, it's just that we love the church family in which the Lord has placed us because that's where he means to bless us and we can't get enough of it. We are addicted to it.

You know, addictions eventually show, don't they? They do eventually. You can hide them but they do show and this addiction to Christ's church most of all. Well, are you a Christ's church addict? Because you can't be a Christ-centered addict without being a Christ church addict, can you? You can't say to Jesus, "I don't care a fig leaf that you died for the church because I'll live my own Christian life as a solitary individual." Shame on

you if you think that. You're spitting in the face of the Savior who gave his life blood to create this community and so the kind of hands-off, keep your distance, don't think I'm going to be part of all the struggles and strife and difficulties that are going on there, it's just nonsense. It's high-faluting spiritual falsehood and nonsense because John is saying, "Could it be the reason it's never dawned on you that you have this glorious privilege of fellowship is because it's never dawned on you what your chief glorious privilege is?" And all you see is people. Some you like, some you don't like. Some too tall, some too small. Some speak funny, some look funny. Some unlike me, some are like me. That's all I see and because I don't see Jesus, how on earth would I ever think that I would see Jesus' people and love them?

Then he adds something, doesn't he? He says, "And our fellowship is with the Father and with Jesus Christ, his Son." Without preparation, this happened in our service earlier on in both of the prayers and you may not have noticed it but both of my colleagues in their prayers kind of worked their way round the three persons of the Trinity. In prayer: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. You say, "Well, of course we do that. We're Trinitarian." This isn't, my friends, metallic Trinitarianism, this is an expression of the fact that we know in the gospel that we have a special kind of fellowship with the Father. He is, according to the Scriptures, he's the only person of the Trinity who adopts us into the family of God. The Son doesn't do that and the Spirit doesn't do that. You can't rightly say to the Spirit, "Spirit, thank you for adopting me into the family of God," because he'll tap you on the shoulder next time you're reading your Bible and say, "Pay closer attention to this: it's the Father who adopted you."

Although we sometimes get confused in our prayers, the Father did not die for me on the cross. I know we sometimes get confused when we're praying to the Father and say, "Oh, thank you so much for dying for us on the cross." He didn't die for you on the cross. The Father never died for you on the cross. You cannot thank the Father for dying for you on the cross but you can thank you him for giving his only Son to die for you on the cross and there is something absolutely unique as you come to God, the Trinity, and you say to his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, "Lord Jesus, thank you for dying for me on the cross." And you see, that opens up the glory of having fellowship with the Trinity. The Holy Spirit didn't die for you on the cross but you're able to say to the Holy Spirit, "Holy Spirit, thank you for opening my eyes to see what the Lord Jesus did for me on the cross, for helping me to see how the Father didn't spare his own Son but gave him up for me on the cross. O Father, O Son, O Holy Spirit, eternal God, three-personed God," as Dr. Thomas described him in prayer, "I bless you for all that each wonderful person of your glorious Trinity has done for me."

John had a sense of this and now he's saying, "This marvelous fellowship that we have with one another, it's because we have fellowship with the Father and with his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ." Then he says this interesting thing at the end, he says, "By the way, we're writing these things so that our joy may be complete." Where did that come from? It's very simple. Why am I preaching this sermon? So that my joy may be complete. Because if you don't get this, how can my joy ever be complete? How can I have complete joy if you don't have complete joy in the gospel? That's what John is saying.



He's saying, "I long for my joy to be complete." Just like Jesus says in John 15:11, he says, "I've said these things to you so that my joy might be in you and that your joy might be complete." John, at whatever age he is, has eventually, he's got it. He sees it and he understands that everything the Lord Jesus had taught him was so that Jesus' joy in him would be complete because Jesus' joy couldn't be complete until John's joy was complete. We're like that as fathers and mothers, aren't we? We say to our children, "I can never be happy as long as you're unhappy but if you're happy then I can be happy. I can never be fully joyful unless you, my child, my beloved son, daughter, until you're joyful. But if you're joyful, then my joy will know no boundaries." So, he's speaking about something glorious.

Did you notice the title of this sermon, incidentally? What's it got to do with the sermon? This: you know where these words come from, don't you? There were several hundreds of you who had been assiduously studying Pilgrim's Progress on Wednesday nights with us and with Dr. Thomas, these are the words that Pilgrim has on his lips as he puts his fingers into his ears and leaves the city of Destruction, crying out, "Life, life, eternal life." Under the title of this sermon for one very simple reason: that in our congregation of people this size and diversity and with strangers who are constantly here, it's just possible this entire sermon is mumbo-jumbo to you and if you spot one of our members as you leave, you might say to them, "Is it like this every week? What on earth is he going on about?" And you'll have told them far more than you would ever imagine. You would have told them you're still outside the family. You've still not heard the Father's voice, the glory of knowing the Lord Jesus and having fellowship with his people and fellowship with the Father and the Son so it's a total mystery to you and you think you're an insider but you're actually still outside. John is saying, "Don't you catch just a taste of the glory of Jesus Christ?"

Our fellowship is waiting for you and his fellowship awaits you so put your fingers in your ears and run to Jesus and say, "Life, life, eternal life."

*Heavenly Father, we thank you for the wisdom of the gospel, the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray that our life together here may increasingly vibrate with the privilege of fellowship with one another knowing that our fellowship together in the Spirit is with you, our Father, and Jesus Christ, your Son, our Savior. Hear us we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*