

That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life

The Word of Life

1 John 1:1-4

Rev. Freddy Fritz

May 2, 2021

The Word of Life

Scripture

I am starting a new sermon series on the Letters of John. Most scholars believe that the Apostle John wrote all three letters. They also believe that John wrote the Gospel and the Revelation. John wrote the three letters most likely around the start of the final decade of the first century.

John, along with many other Christians, probably left Jerusalem just before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 67 A.D. He carried on his apostolic ministry in the city of Ephesus, where he was the elder statesman responsible for a number of churches in the vicinity.

After serving in Ephesus for a number of years, a group left the church because they denied that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God (*cf.* 1 John 2:18-23; 4:1-3). This generated a lot of hostility (*cf.* 1 John 3:4-10). So, John wrote these letters to do damage control and to assure the Christians of their salvation. John's purpose in writing these letters is given in 1 John 5:13, where he states, "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." Hence, the title for this sermon series: "That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life."

In his First Letter, John dispenses with the regular earmarks of a first-century letter. The letter is in the style of a sermon rather than a letter. Moreover, because there is no linear progression throughout the letter, it is difficult follow. John uses the ancient style of "amplification," which includes cyclical repetition (in this case of moral, social, and doctrinal tests), hyperbole, and stark contrasts.

So, with that very brief historical background, we note that John began his First Letter about the word of life.

Let's read about the word of life in 1 John 1:1-4:

¹That 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— ²the 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— ³that 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. ⁴And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:1-4)

Introduction

Vishal Mangalwadi, a Christian scholar from India, shared the following story on his blog after visiting America:

In November, 2011, I visited two classes at a Christian university in North America. I asked both: “How many of you would still believe Christianity if you found out tomorrow that Christianity was not true. That is: God never became a man; Jesus did not die for our sin; or, that he did not rise from the dead?”

Twelve hands went up in the class of about 25 students. These sincere and devout students had grown up in Christian homes, gone to church all their lives, and studied in Christian schools. Some had been in that Christian university for three years! They respected their elders who taught them that Christianity was all about faith—with little concern for truth.

That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life

Christianity lost America because 20th-century evangelicalism branded itself as the *party of faith*. Secularism (science, university, media) became the *party of truth*. This is one reason why 70 percent of Christian youth give up meaningful involvement with the church when they grow up.... Secularism acquired the “truth” brand by default because evangelicalism began defining the Church’s mission as [just] cultivating *faith*, not [also] promoting knowledge of *truth*.¹

In his commentary on this letter, John MacArthur begins with this comment, “We live in an era that looks with suspicion on any type of certainty or conviction about the truth.”² Our society grants equal validity to every opinion and philosophy—except to Christian truth claims. One of our greatest challenges at the present time is the sexual revolution. Biblical truth and morality are now openly and widely criticized as out of date and irrelevant for a modern society.

That is what makes the Letters of John so important for us to study at this time. Although John is particularly concerned to help believers be assured of their salvation, he grounds all his teaching in the eternal truth of God’s word.

John begins his presentation regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ, whom he refers to as the “word of life.”

Lesson

First John 1:1-4 gives us five certainties about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Let’s use the following outline:

¹ Vishal Mangalwadi, “Why Christianity Lost America?” Vishal Mangalwadi’s Blog (12-10-2011).

² John MacArthur, *1, 2, 3 John*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007), 13.

1. The Word of Life Is Eternal (1:1a)
2. The Word of Life Is Historical (1:1b-2a)
3. The Word of Life Is Proclaimed (1:2b-3a)
4. The Word of Life Is Relational (1:3b)
5. The Word of Life Is Joyful (1:4)

I. The Word of Life Is Eternal (1:1a)

The first certainty about the person and work of Jesus Christ is that the word of life is eternal.

John begins his First Letter with these words, **“That which was from the beginning”** (1:1a). The Greek word that is translated as **“That which”** in the *English Standard Version* is neuter. That is why some translations, such as the *New American Standard Bible*, translate it as, *“What was from the beginning”* (emphasis mine).

The “What” or **“That which”** refers to “the word of life,” which John mentions at the end of verse 1. As we shall see shortly, the “word of life” refers to Jesus and to his work. It includes the gospel, that is, the good news that salvation is found only in Jesus Christ.

Thus, John is saying that “the word of life **was from the beginning.**” That is, Jesus is eternal. Jesus’ work is eternal. And Jesus’ message is eternal.

When John wrote this letter, the seed of an ancient heresy that became known as “Gnosticism” was being spread. “Gnosticism” is a philosophy that entails “gnosis,” which comes from the Greek word for “knowledge.” Therefore, proponents of Gnosticism taught that they had a knowledge of God that was available only to those “in the know,” the spiritual elite. There were false teachers who left the church because they denied that Jesus was the eternal Son of God.

That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life

John was addressing believers about false teaching that was being spread in his day. We constantly face false teaching in our day. And we will continue to face false teaching until the Lord returns. Jesus himself warned his followers in Matthew 24:24, “For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.”

In a story about country artist Willie Nelson for *Rolling Stone* that was published in May 2019, Patrick Doyle writes:

Nelson wrote a new song last night. It’s called “God is Love.” He speaks a verse of it, making eye contact with me and the entire time: “Take these words of wisdom with you everywhere you go/Tell all the religions in the world, and through them the truth shall flow/But God is love, and love is God, that’s all you need to know.”

Nelson says he doesn’t see God as a “big guy in the sky, making all the decisions. I think God is love, period. There’s love in everything out there—trees, grass, air, water. Love is the one thing that runs through every living thing. Everybody loves something: The grass loves the water. That’s the one thing that we all have in common, that we all love and like to be loved. That’s God.”³

This kind of theology—which is not true, by the way—is becoming increasingly popular in our society. It is this kind of misguided theology that helps promote the sexual revolution and the confusion about human identity in our culture.

That is why John begins his letter with a clear statement that the word of life is eternal.

³ Patrick Doyle, “The High Life,” *Rolling Stone* (May 2019), 94.

II. The Word of Life Is Historical (1:1b-2a)

The second certainty about the person and work of Jesus Christ is that the word of life is historical.

The false teachers were teaching that knowledge of God was attained through a special knowledge that was given only to a few spiritual elite persons. John, however, made it clear that the word of life was actually historical. In his record about the life and ministry of Jesus in what we call “The Gospel of John,” he wrote, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1-2, 14).

In his First Letter, John notes four ways in which the word of life was historical and perceived by the senses.

A. The Word of Life Was Heard (1:1b)

First, the word of life was heard.

John writes in verse 1b, “**...which we have heard.**” John was with Jesus throughout his ministry. John heard Jesus teach and preach. He heard Jesus tell parables. John heard Jesus speak to him and the other disciples in private.

So, John writes as one who had heard the word of life.

B. The Word of Life Was Seen (1:1c)

Second, the word of life was seen.

John writes in verse 1c, “**...which we have seen with our eyes.**” The Greek word for “**seen**” is in the perfect tense, which means a past, completed action with a present, ongoing

That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life

impact. Very importantly, John adds that he and others had seen the word of life **“with our eyes.”** John wanted to be clear that he did not have a mystical or spiritual vision of the word of life. He had the physical experience of seeing Jesus with his own eyes. John saw Jesus every day for three years as he witnessed Jesus’ life and ministry.

C. The Word of Life Was Looked Upon (1:1d)

Third, the word of life was looked upon.

John writes in verse 1d: **“...which we looked upon.”** What is the difference between “seen” and **“looked upon”**? The Greek word for “seen” means simply “to perceive by sight.” The Greek word for **“looked upon”** means “to gaze upon something that stimulates the moral and mental faculties in an impressive way.” Another way of understanding the meaning of **“looked upon”** is “to gaze at someone or something until something has been grasped of the significance of that person or thing.” John’s point is that he did not merely look and see Jesus with his eyes but that he so looked upon Jesus that he grasped the significance of Jesus. That is, Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God.

D. The Word of Life Was Touched (1:1e-2a)

And fourth, the word of life was touched.

John writes in verse 1e, **“...and have touched with our hands.”** John and others were of course able to touch Jesus during his three years of ministry. Interestingly, John uses the same word for **“touched”** that Jesus did after his resurrection. Jesus said to his disciples, in Luke 24:39, “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. *Touch* me, and see. For a spirit does

not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” Both before and after his resurrection, John and the others touched Jesus.

John wants his readers to know that he was writing **“concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest”** (1:1f-2a). The word **“manifest”** in Greek means “to make visible what was hidden.” According to John, at a certain point in history, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1;14a). Therefore, John writes in his First Letter that the word of life was heard, seen, looked upon, and touched.

So, the word of life is eternal and historical.

III. The Word of Life Is Proclaimed (1:2b-3a)

The third certainty about the person and work of Jesus Christ is that the word of life is proclaimed.

John goes on to write in verses 2b-3a, **“...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—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you.”** The word of life became God in human form to be proclaimed. Commenting on this certainty, John Stott writes:

The historical appearance of the eternal life was proclaimed, not monopolized. The revelation was given to the few for the sake of the many. They were to declare it to the world.... He [Jesus] not only showed himself to the disciples to qualify them as *eyewitnesses*, but gave them an authoritative commission as *apostles* to preach the gospel. Our author insists that he possesses these necessary credentials. Possessing them, he is very bold. Having heard, seen and touched the Lord Jesus, he now testifies to him. Having received a commission, he proclaims the gospel with authority. For the Christian message is neither a philosophical speculation, nor

That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life

a tentative suggestion, nor a modest contribution to religious thought, but a confident affirmation by those whose experience and commission have qualified them to make it.⁴

So, the word of life is eternal, historical, and proclaimed.

IV. The Word of Life Is Relational (1:3b)

The fourth certainty about the person and work of Jesus Christ is that the word of life is relational.

John writes in verse 3b, **“so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”** The words **“so that”** introduce a reason or purpose for writing, namely, **“you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”** The Greek word for **“fellowship”** (*koinonia*) means more than sharing coffee and cookies after a worship service. It was used by business partners who were committed to a common venture. Christian fellowship means sharing a common life in Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit. Fellowship binds believers to one another because fellowship has bound them to Jesus.

So, the word of life is eternal, historical, proclaimed, and relational.

V. The Word of Life Is Joyful (1:4)

And the fifth certainty about the person and work of Jesus Christ is that the word of life is joyful.

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tynedale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 65–67.

John writes in verse 4, **“And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”** The reason or purpose for writing is given in the words that are translated as **“so that.”** John went on to say that it is so that **“our joy may be complete.”** John’s joy is complete as those to whom he wrote understood the kind of fellowship they had. Their fellowship was not only with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, but their fellowship was also with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ.

So, the word of life is eternal, historical, proclaimed, relational, and joyful.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the word of life in 1 John 1:1-4, let us thank God for sending the word of life.

I want to leave you with this conclusion from commentator Gary Burge, who writes:

First John 1:1-4 suggests that at least one doctrine, one conviction, cannot be dismissed lightly. Any minister, any Christian, who does not embrace the reality of God-in-history, any believer who can be cavalier about the definitive event in salvation history, namely, Jesus Christ as God-among-us, has departed significantly from the faith of the early church.⁵

Brothers and sisters, let us hold fast to the word of truth that was once for all delivered to the saints. Amen.

⁵ Gary M. Burge, *Letters of John*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 60.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can
be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons.
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp.
3. www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=Fred-dyFritz.

Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org