

JOHN: THE BOSOM FRIEND OF JESUS

The name John comes from the Hebrew יוֹחָנָן meaning *Jehovah is gracious*, or *Jehovah is a gracious giver*. Implied in this name is the prophecy of the incarnate God, for, as John said in John 3:16 “*God so loved the World that He gave...*”

It is John, above all the disciples, to whom Jesus displays his gracious spirit. It is John who is described five times in Scripture as “*the disciple whom Jesus loved*” (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). It is John who is chosen along with Peter and James to be in that inner circle; it is John to whom Christ entrusts his widowed mother as he hangs on the Cross. It was John from among the disciples who was last to leave the Saviour’s side in his passion (John 19:25) and who was first at the tomb on the resurrection morning (John 20:4-5). The man we are now considering is as the Greek Fathers called him, “*The Leaner on the Bosom;*” or, as we would say today “*The bosom friend of Jesus.*” (Schaff 2006, 1:413, n.4)

The son of Zebedee and Salome, and the brother of James (John 19:25 cf. Mark 15:40; Matthew 27:56), John was born into the home of a wealthy fisherman and he followed in his father’s occupation. This is evident from the following; **1.** He had hired servants (Mark 1:20); **2.** It would appear that Salome ministered unto the Lord “*with her substance*” (Matthew 27:55-56; Luke 8:3); **3.** John was acquainted with the High Priest (John 18:15). An interesting observation also on John 19:25 would lead us to believe that John may be the full cousin of the Lord Jesus.

John heard the proclamation of John the Baptist, “*Behold the lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29 esp. 40), and was later called by Jesus as one of his disciples (Matthew 4:21). Beyond his numbering with the twelve, John was one of the chosen three, the inner circle of men who accompanied Jesus at the raising of Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5:37), the transfiguration (Mark 9:2) and in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33).

We see here, then that the privileged position of worldly wealth that John was born into was replaced by the privileged position with the Lord Jesus Christ, having as Matthew puts it “*immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him*” (Matthew 4:21).

As in the case of Peter the Lord surnamed James and John "*Boanerges*" meaning "*the Sons of Thunder*" in Mark 3:17. This surname was undoubtedly an appellation of honour identifying some quality in them or foreshadowing their future ministry, or both. Satan was called the "Son of perdition" (John 17:12), as he who resembles perdition. Barnabas is named "the Son of Consolation" (Acts 4:36) as one whose ministry was of consolation.

Thunder to the Hebrews signified the voice of God, an ardent passion and zeal, and a great strength of character. As we study the life of John we are going to see this although sometimes it was misdirected. This misdirected zeal revealed itself on three occasions: **1.** When he saw some casting out devils in Christ's name, he forbade them because they were not followers of John and the other disciples (Mark 9:38; Luke 9:49; cf. Numbers 11:28); **2.** In Samaria he was wanting to call down fire from heaven because they did not receive Christ (Luke 9:54 cf. II Kings 1:10). **3.** He acquiesced with his mother in her desire for her two sons to have the chief place in the Kingdom of God (Matthew 20:20; Mark 10:35)

While there was a little misunderstanding on the part of John regarding some of these issues, yet his "Son of Thunder" title was not out of place. He was a fearless servant of Christ, constant and consistent from the beginning until the end of his long life, thought to be around AD 98. He was not afraid of danger: **1.** He was the only Apostle who remained at the Cross; **2.** He stood before the Jewish Council with Peter in Acts 5:29 and said fearlessly "*We ought to obey God rather than man.*" **3.** He also stayed at Jerusalem with the other Apostles during the times of what Acts 8:1 calls "*great persecution.*"

Although John had no rabbinical teaching and was regarded by the Jewish establishment as "*unlearned and ignorant*" (Acts 4:13), he was nevertheless "*bold*" in the proclamation of truth in the city of Jerusalem. Here we lose sight of John, although we know from Galatians 1:18-19 that he is there, and again fifteen years later in Acts 15:6. He is for the most part ministering in the shadow of Peter (Acts 3:1, 4, 13; 8:14).

In that twenty or twenty-five years of ministry in Jerusalem, before going to Ephesus, we have not a word from John, not an act of

missionary zeal recorded and not a ounce of theological acumen displayed nor a performance of ecclesiastical leadership. And yet he is called in Galatians 2:9 a "*pillar in the Church*." We ask ourselves what did this mean, how was it he became of such high standing and respect with such a quiet and impenetrable reserve?

1. THE PENSIVE PREPARATION FOR SERVICE

John was not a man of action like Peter or Paul. While Peter was out evangelizing the Jews and Paul was blazing a trail for the cause of Christ throughout Europe, John was quietly being prepared for his literary career. As far as the outward spread of Christianity is concerned we read little if anything of John's involvement. While others were out planting John was busy in quiet mediation preparing to water the seed.

John was a quiet man. There was no radical change in John's character as we see in Peter's after Pentecost. John's growth as a Christian was steady and consistent. It is conspicuous throughout his gospel that he is not a man to push himself forward. He does not mention his name, but rather uses the phrase "*the disciple whom Jesus Loved*" to identify himself (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). None of the other gospels use this appellation, only John himself. Some would view this as egotistical but it is worth noting that no act of his own is being commended or praised, John is speaking of himself as *being loved* not of him *loving* the Saviour. In other words this speaks of the feeling of the Lord toward John and not of John's feelings toward the Lord (Trench 1850, 90).

In John 21:22-23 we read of Peter seeing John and turning to Jesus said "*Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.*" The point of contrast here is not between the violent death of martyrdom and a peaceful departure from this life, but between the impetuous and impatient spirit of Peter and John's meditative, patient waiting on the Lord (Schaff 2006, 1:413, n.3). The Lord says to Peter, regardless of your lot in life, John's lot is it wait.

Peter was a man of impulsive aggressive action; John was a man of meditative reflection. Perception and intuition were his leading traits.

He heard more and saw more than the other disciples but spoke less. He absorbed that which he had seen and heard of the ministry of Christ and would later open it up for the examination of the Church in his epistles.

John had the theological genius and ability to relate that which was, as one commentator put it, the union between the mystical with the matter of fact (Findlay 1977, 52). That which John saw, heard and handled (I John 1:3) he had, not only the sight, but a penetrating insight to recognized a deep significance in it all and to articulate that.

In John 20:4-5 as John and Peter run to the tomb the morning of the resurrection. John, the younger and more energetic outruns the older Peter. When they get there we read of an interesting catalogue of events. Both Apostles act characteristically; (Plummer 1887, 339) John remains outside the tomb, in awe, filled with the impression of the empty tomb having only glanced in (βλεπει), while Peter in his natural impulsiveness rushes in and surveys (θεωρει) the contents of the tomb. John 20:8 says *"then went in that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre and he saw, and believed."* It was John who perceived (ειδω). We notice again in John 21:7 when Peter said *"I go a fishing"* (Vs. 3) and they toiled all night and caught nothing. In the morning the Lord Jesus stood on the shore and said *"Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find"* and they were not able to draw it in for the multitude of fish. It was John who perceived. As verse 7 says John declared to the others *"it is the Lord."* When Peter, who had the desire for the Saviour but not the perception, heard that he threw himself into the water to go to the Saviour.

Do we not see here two others who are contrasted in Scripture in this same vein? In Luke 10:38-42 we read of Mary and Martha; one who with a burning desire to serve the Lord was cumbered about with much serving, the other with that same desire *"sat at his feet and heard his word."* Martha looked at Christ and asked what can I do? Mary looked at Christ and asked what can I learn?

Unlike Paul, John has nothing to say of the government of the Church or indeed of the visible church at all but of the spiritual substance of the Church, of that vital union with God through Christ, and of that communion with the saints in love, John has much to say.

God has called us with our several gifts; we need to be careful in exercising those gifts that we are not so cumbered with the aggressive activity of the overzealous, but that we take time to sit at the feet of Christ, drinking in the spirit of his Word and the Spirit of service and that we are *“more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools”* (Ecclesiastes 5:1). I believe this is why John was *“the disciple whom Jesus loved;”* because he was willing to learn, not agitated by over-activity, nor distracted by peripheral problems he leaned on Christ and learned from Christ.

2. THE PASSIONATE PROSECUTION OF SERVICE

There are two descriptions of John that arise directly from the New Testament. The one is a name given to him by the Lord: *“Son of Thunder.”* The other is the defining theme of his life and ministry: *“The Apostle of Love.”* With the quiet, reserved and meditative personality we have considered and with the theme of love that runs throughout John’s writings we tend to view him as a gentle inoffensive, weak character. Leonardo Da Vinci’s depiction of John in his famous painting *“The Last Supper,”* portrays a smooth faced, soft-skinned effeminate individual. The modern definition of love as soft and sentimental would paint John in the same manner. This impression of John, however, would conflict with the epithet given to him by the Lord, *“Son of Thunder.”* He was a man of deep unbending passion, fervent zeal and ardent vehemence.

How do we correlate these two, seemingly contradictory descriptions of this man who was the bosom friend of Jesus? I believe there is a very simply explanation. I see in John a man who is, in himself, a sensitive yet determined individual. We noticed this right at the beginning of our history of him when the Lord called him, and he *“Immediately left the ship and their father and followed him.”* Once that decision was made John without reservation, devotes himself to the Lord. There is no question in his mind that in Christ he can find all his dreams realized and his hopes fulfilled.

To Christ then, John naturally devotes his life and that devotion becomes exclusive and intolerant. Christ is the exclusive owner of his

heart's affections and all that Christ is and has. On the other side of this devotion and love for Christ and his Church, John is repelled by all that is not in sympathy with Christ, or that does not share the same enthusiasm. Beyond that he had a righteous hatred for all that is against Christ's person and his people. In other words, John out of a passionate love for Christ loves his Church and hates all that would threaten its destruction. His energy for God is born out of his love.

This explains why John paints very often in black and white; why he forever see things in contrast between light and darkness (I John 1:5); love and hate (I John 2:10-11); and between mercy and wrath, (John 3:16 *cf.* 3:36). I do not, therefore, see the name 'Boanerges' as contradictory to love. As thunder, to the Hebrews spoke of strength of character, so here it speaks of John's strength, his burning zeal for the truth and an unflinching passion to defend it.

John's passion and zeal manifested in his hatred of error was directed in the opposite direction with the same force, manifested in love towards God's people. He loved the people of God. As the bosom friend of Jesus, he was also the friend of Christ's body, the Church and his one driving desire was that they would love one another as Christ had commanded them (John 13:34, 35; 15:12,17). John echoed this command in his epistles over and over again; e.g **I John 3:23** *"And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, even as he gave us commandment."* And again in **I John 4:7** *"Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is begotten of God, and knoweth God."* And again in **I John 4:11-12** *"Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man hath beheld God at any time: if we love one another, God abideth in us, and his love is perfected in us."*

Jerome tells the story of John's incessant repetition of this command to love one another. Wearied by the constant preaching of this one message they asked him why he always returned to this theme. He answered *"because it was the command of our Lord, and if they did nothing else this alone was enough."* (Trench 1850, 233)