

WHAT WE SAW, HEARD AND TOUCHED

(1 John 1.1-7)

Introduction

Today, we're starting a four-week series on the First Letter of John.

Before we get into the letter itself, I want to explore a bit who this John was because it helps us understand where he's coming from. The Gospels say quite a lot about him but I want to just mention two things.

Fiery Temperament

John and his brother James were partners in a fishing business based on the Sea of Galilee. When he first met Jesus, he was young, arrogant, loud and impulsive.

When Jesus called John to follow him in Matthew 4, he was sitting in a boat washing all the seaweed out of his net and it says he *immediately* left the boat and his father and went. That's John. All or nothing.

Jesus nicknamed him (and his brother) sons of thunder. That's because they were both hot tempered. In Luke 9, Jesus and the Twelve are travelling through Samaria where Jews were not welcome and, sure enough, they get a frosty reception.

John sees this and boils over. "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven and destroy these people?" Leave the smiting to us, Lord. John is intolerant and prejudiced and unloving. With him it's usually the nuclear option first. And of course, Jesus sharply rebukes him. But that's John. This is who he is.

There are two ends of the temperament spectrum. At one end, you get dimmer switch people. They see two sides of every argument. They are cautious and reasonable.

At the other end of the spectrum, you find on/off switch people. There are just two options; on or off. All or nothing. Black or white.

Which end of the spectrum are you at? Dimmer switch or on/off switch? John is your textbook on/off switch man.

Now, at the time this letter is written, decades after he first met Jesus, John is still an on/off switch. All through this letter he writes in stark and ultimate contrasts.

There is no middle road for John between love and hatred, light and darkness, truth and lies, Christ and Antichrist, God as Father or the devil as father.

But what you also see in 1 John is that John is now a mild-mannered, benign old gentleman who is always going on about loving one another. All the way through, he calls his fellow believers "little children," or "dear friends."

He's still that on/off switch. But John's personality is now redirected.

When John first met Jesus, he was a young, rough diamond. But Jesus chose him to be one of the twelve. That's because when Jesus calls you, he doesn't just look at what you are. He looks deeper and sees what you can become, with a touch of grace.

God takes you as you come. But by the time he's finished with you, you might look very different from how you started - you probably will. But it will be *his* work.

Deep Friendship

So that's the first thing I wanted to say. Here's the second: ...of all the people living on the face of the earth, who would you call your best friend? Don't say Jesus. It's a great answer, it's the best answer, but I mean apart from Jesus.

Some of us would think of a spouse, or an old school friend, or maybe a parent or a sibling. Perhaps a fellow church member...

Who would *you* pick out as your closest companion, the one above all others who knows you best, who puts up with you the most and who sticks with you the longest?

People say that dogs are man's best friend. Dogs are legendary for being loyal and faithful aren't they? They want to be with you, they whimper when you leave them, they give you the sad, sorrowful eyes when you feel down, they just love you to death.

Dogs have nothing bad to say about you, ever. Someone wrote a prayer once; "Lord, make me the kind of person my dog thinks I am."

Of the twelve disciples, there was an inner circle of three; John was in it. Of the three, one was closest to Jesus; that was John. John was the best friend Jesus had on earth.

At the last supper, John's head was leaning against Jesus' chest. He literally heard and felt the Lord's beating heart.

When Jesus was dying, John was the only one of the twelve to be there. He was one of those who buried the body at sunset. He was the first of the twelve to the tomb on Easter Sunday. Nobody knew Jesus as well, as personally, as perceptively or as closely as John did.

No historical figure has had as many books written about him or her than Jesus of Nazareth. You visit the British Library or go on Amazon and you'll find many thousands of books about Jesus. Do they all say the same thing? No!

One on my shelf by Marcus Borg rejects the virgin birth, asserts that Jesus' death was not God's will, opposes the belief that Christ died sacrificially in our place, denies the bodily resurrection, and dismisses much of the Gospels as fiction. For Marcus Borg, Jesus was just a Jewish mystic and revolutionary who challenged the oppressive powers of his day.

I was asked to review this book for Christianity magazine in 2015. I slated it so ruthlessly that they called me and said, "No one's going to buy this book after that review!" So, they declined to publish it! They still paid me £25 for my trouble though.

But who would you trust most to tell you about a figure in history? Some academic 20 centuries after the event? Or an eye witness who also happens to be that person's best friend and closest companion?

That Which Was from the Beginning...

Now let's get into the letter itself. It's just a short passage so I'll read it again, but I'm going to read it in the Message paraphrase because John has a quite abstract way of saying what he wants to say and people sometimes struggle to bring these conceptual statements in line with their practical experience. The Message is quite good at putting it in language we're more familiar with.

From the very first day, we were there, taking it all in - we heard it with our own ears, saw it with our own eyes, verified it with our own hands. The Word of Life appeared right before our eyes; we saw it happen! And now we're telling you in most sober prose that what we witnessed was, incredibly, this: the infinite Life of God himself took shape before us. We saw it, we heard it, and now we're telling you so you can experience it along with us, this experience of communion with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. Our motive for writing is simply this: We want you to enjoy this, too. Your joy will double our joy!

This, in essence, is the message we heard from Christ and are passing on to you: God is light, pure light; there's not a trace of darkness in him. If we claim that we experience a shared life with him and continue to stumble around in the dark, we're obviously lying through our teeth—we're not living what we claim. But if we walk in the light, God himself being the light, we also experience a shared life with one another, as the sacrificed blood of Jesus, God's Son, purges all our sin.

As John begins his letter, it's as if he imagines a reader saying, "Why should we listen to you?" So, he starts by saying, "Look, I actually touched him. I hugged him. I saw the sweat on his brow as we walked on hot dusty roads.

I went out fishing once and didn't catch a thing all night. But when he said to throw the net out the other side, I helped pull in nets bulging with the biggest catch I have seen in my career. And I remember the way he looked into my eyes. As if to say, "That's how you catch fish. I can remember it like yesterday. I was there."

In Greek the verb "to see," (to physically view something), is *horan*. John uses it here in v1 ("that which we have *seen with our eyes*").

But there's another Greek word that we sometimes translate as "see" but it's different; it's *théasthai* and it comes in v2. "We have *seen it* and testify to it." This word means more than just looking at something. It means to gaze at someone or something until you grasp of the significance of it.

That's what John means here; I didn't just look at him. I saw him and when I saw him, I saw everything.

When you discover real love, true love, you want to keep it forever. That is my story. That was my overwhelming emotion the day I encountered Jesus. I said to myself, "I'm not sure I fully understand all this, but I just know it's what I have always been looking for and I never want to lose it."

Actually, I learned afterwards that this was only the beginning of the journey. I've had some high highs and some low lows as a Christian but Jesus has been faithful through every one of them.

The Indian evangelist Ravi Zacharias wrote a book for disenchanted churchgoers called *Has Christianity Failed You?* He wrote it to address the complaint he kept hearing from people that church had let them down.

Sadly, that is sometimes true; the church does fail people, ministers and members alike can get it all wrong. John says that can happen here in v6.

If we claim to have fellowship with [God] and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.

Tragically, religious people can hide a whole lot of darkness. John says, "they're lying through their teeth and not living what they claim."

Love the church, but don't put your faith in it. If you put your faith in the church you will almost certainly at some point be disappointed. Not with Jesus though. Jesus fails nobody.

Ending – the Joy of Fellowship

You know what it's like when you see a great film, or hear a great song, or watch a great match or taste a new food and you are so glad you did, you want someone else you love to experience it too? And when they do and they love it as well it makes you even happier? That's what John means here in v3-4.

John calls it 'fellowship.' It's a word that was used to describe the bond shared by conjoined twins.

John says in v3 "I'm telling you about what I saw and heard that changed my life so you can experience it too. And when you do, our friendship, our bond with one another and with Father God will make me – and you – just so happy.

The Reformer Martin Luther tasted that when the word of God lit a fire in his heart. When he looked back at his life he said, "I would not give up one moment of [it] for all the joys and riches of the world, even if they lasted for thousands and thousands of years."

Let's pray...