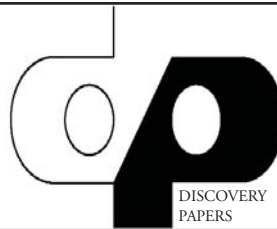


# EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY

**SERIES: IN HIM IS NO DARKNESS AT ALL**



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1 John 1:1-4  
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Steve Zeisler  
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Most of us have probably had conversations this past week about the uncertainty of the world. What once was irrational confidence in the creation of wealth has given way to a paralyzing fear of its loss. And yet we gather together on Sunday mornings, brothers and sisters to one another, the Spirit present among us and the Scriptures in our hands to tell us truth and give us promises we can count on. The Lord Jesus, probably the greatest investment counselor of all, said to store up for ourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and thieves do not break in and steal, and that when we seek first *his* kingdom and *his* righteousness, everything else will be given to us as well (Matthew 6:20, 33). So with gratitude to God for all of Scripture, let's turn to the letter of 1 John. In this message, we will look at the first four verses in order to orient ourselves and set the stage for the remainder of the letter and this sermon series.

1 John 1:1-4:

**What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.**

Both tradition and scholarship attribute the authorship of 1 John to the apostle John. He also wrote 2 John, 3 John, the Revelation, and, of course, the Gospel of John. John's apostolic authority is clear in this letter, and he doesn't even mention his name, assuming that the people who receive the letter know him. We can also note that John wrote this letter at the end of his life. It is characterized by overflow of ideas rather than meticulous craftsmanship. The language is sometimes feisty, sometimes tender, containing passages that are both hard-edged and lyrical.

The letter begins with a series of unconnected phrases. Verses one and two aren't complete sentences.

Why does John begin so awkwardly? Perhaps it is because, as John begins to write, he also begins to remember. He is writing this letter to counter false teaching that is present among people that he cared about, but as he writes, his mind is filled with memories of Christ, and his thoughts and language are swept away by the things he remembers.

So let's look at three of these opening phrases. First, "What was from the beginning." Starting with the beginning is often a good idea. The very first words of the Bible read, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." John opens his gospel with, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." And in this letter, he again hearkens back to events that come first. One of the arguments he will marshal against these false teachers is that he was present when Jesus revealed himself to the world as Messiah and Savior. He heard Jesus speak and watched him perform miracles. He was eyewitness to the remarkable events of Jesus' life, and those who oppose him were not.

Advertisers often claim that their product is "new and improved." The very best thing is the latest thing. They want to persuade us that newer is always better and that we should discard the old for the new. That claim may well work for infant car seats or laundry detergent, but John says it is not true in the ways of God. What we say must be anchored in long-standing realities and the unchanging character of God. The writings of second and third century Gnostics have gained popularity in our time, but their teaching should be rejected now (as it was then) because they lack the truth and authority of the apostles who were present at the beginning.

The lyrics of this 19th century hymn written by A. Catherine Hankey might encourage us.

*I love to tell the story, for some have never heard*

*The message of salvation from God's Own holy Word.*

*I love to tell the story, for those who know it best*

*Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest;*

*And when in scenes of glory I sing the new, new song,*

*'Twill be the old, old story that I have loved so long.*

*I love to tell the story! 'Twill be my theme in glory—  
To tell the old, old story Of Jesus and His love. <sup>1</sup>*

The second phrase we can pull out of verses 1 and 2 is “what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands.” Now, this letter argues against those who insisted that the physical world and the spiritual world could never meet. So John speaks of touching and hearing and gazing upon Jesus, who was a real man yet nothing less than God incarnate.

And here is where I think John loses track of his words, because as he writes, his mind is filled with memories of the savior who loved him so much. I picture John dictating to a scribe, his words catching in his throat and his eyes beginning to tear. This should challenge us. It is often easier to talk about the great ideas of Christianity, the philosophical underpinnings of the faith, Christian worldviews, or even radical discipleship than it is to speak of Jesus in a way that stirs hearts. And yet, here is John, testifying of the remarkable man who loved him. Do we have that language? When we speak of Jesus, do we speak from the heart?

I have been walking with Christ for 45 years, yet I clearly remember the day that I gave my life to him. I was at a weekend camp when I was in high school, and heard a simple telling of what Jesus had done on the cross, that he had willingly suffered and given up his life because of *me*. I deserved to be on the cross, but he died in my place.

I am not a very emotional person, nor am I a very visual one. I am wired to process reality through words. And thinking back over my walk with the Lord, I realize that what has made him real to me is the powerful language found in the Bible. The great word pictures of Jesus washing disciples' feet and his earlier insistence that the one who would be great would be servant of all challenged me and dramatically influenced the direction of my life.

Or Hebrews 4:14-16 in which Jesus is presented to us as a faithful High Priest with genuine understanding of what it is like to be weak and tempted. This One knew the broken, dark, shameful stuff that I didn't want to talk to anybody else about. That picture of Jesus as a High Priest who understood someone like me and spoke on my behalf had a tremendous effect because, again, this wasn't just an idea but a *person* who was my advocate, my priest, my friend.

In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul describes seeing Jesus' face as if through a curtain or in a dim mirror (depending on the translation). I remember reading that and longing for the day I will be able to pull the curtain aside and see his face. In Revelation 21:4, John tells us of a time when there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, and he tells us that the Lord himself will reach out to wipe every tear from our eyes. What an amazing thought!

John's gospel recounts fewer actual events than the other gospels do, but the events he does include are filled with intimate detail and intended to move as well as instruct us. The wedding at Cana: Jesus realized that a beautiful young couple would be humiliated in a social environment and he couldn't help but care for them. The outcast at Jacob's well: her life was a train wreck and no one cared, but Jesus spoke to her and treated her as no one else would, surprising her and everyone else. The invalid at the pool of Bethesda: year after year, no one would help him get into the healing waters, but Jesus finally gave him what he had been longing for. The man who was born blind: his own family would discard him rather than tell the truth and risk their place in the synagogue, but he was made new by Jesus. Judas: in the upper room, Jesus held out a crust of bread to him and tenderly did everything he could to win Judas at the end. Thomas: he could not believe stories of the risen Lord, and Jesus came to him and said, “Here, touch my hand and my side.” John's written accounts highlight the way Christ changed lives and cared for people—and in this letter, as an old man, his memories stir him still.

A third phrase we find in these first two verses is “the Word of Life.” “Life” here is the word *zoe* in Greek and means vitality or liveliness. When Jesus healed the man who had been blind from birth (John 9), the Pharisees did not rejoice; instead, they were outraged that it had happened on the Sabbath. Christians are often accused of being like the Pharisees: negative and life-denying. But that is not the message of the New Testament. Jesus said “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life and have it in abundance.” Peter preached courageously not long after he had run in fear. Stephen begged for the lives and the blessing of his killers while they were stoning him. Paul and Silas sang hymns in a Philippian jail at midnight after being beaten and placed in stocks. Following Christ should be something that calls out the best in us and causes us to find more reasons to hope, more people to love, deeper commitment to heal, more delight in restoration. We don't major in blame; we major in hope. This is life that was made plain to us in the one we know as Jesus, our savior, and that is what John is arguing for.

So let's focus now on verses 3 and 4:

...what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

We proclaim these things to advance fellowship; we write these things to advance joy. Now, John has lived a full life. He has lived in the presence of Jesus, as a servant of Jesus, and as an apostle of the church.

He already has fellowship with God the Father and the Son. He has joy. But now he finds himself compelled to give away what he has been given. Christ has formed him so that rather than just resting on what he already has, enjoying the small circle of friends that might gather around him, he finds himself proclaiming, preaching, writing—even engaging in battle with those who tell lies—in order to bless other people. I am writing so that *you* can participate in the life-filled fellowship we experience with the Father and the Son. And we write these things for joy to expand. Joy is the deepest thing there is; it is the great reality of goodness that is much deeper and truer than the circumstances that we can measure with our senses. Joy always has more to discover. And John is longing for all of them to experience more joy, perfected joy, deeper understanding of joy.

The concept of *koinonia* is every bit as important in our time as it was in John's. *Koinonia* means common life. It is not the superficial socializing that so often passes for Christian fellowship. *Koinonia* is life shared at the deepest level: praying together, worshiping together, trusting one another with our burdens and helping each other to carry them. We in this church have the opportunity to share life together, to care for each other, to lift each other up, to take each other in, to offer what we have to each other. And John is saying our *koinonia*, our fellowship, is with each other, and it is with the Father and the Son.

So we now come to the communion table, and I would like us to reflect on two ideas. First, Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." Perhaps you can recall something he has done for you, some occasion when you realized he intervened on your behalf and your heart was moved by his presence. And as you remember, speak to him a word of gratitude for what he has done for you. Second, the communion table is about our life together. We eat this simple meal together. We belong to each other. We all relate to Christ in the same way. Take a minute and consider what it might mean to eat this and be drawn together into the company of people that God has called.

Lord Jesus, thank you for all you are to us. I pray that you will make this meal one that is life-giving. Amen.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *I Love to Tell the Story*, A. Catherine Hankey

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