

Fellowship With God

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[0 : 00] We start two new series today in the morning and evening. First John as we read just a moment ago this morning and then we'll be looking together tonight at a series on the Holy Spirit from now through the end of November.

We read from this letter. First John, he wrote three letters that we have in our Bible and this is the apostle John. He's known as the beloved disciple of Jesus.

He's the writer of the gospel. And you can know that without him telling us very quickly. When you look at the text you'll see in the very first verse he starts out by saying that which was from the beginning and then ends that verse with the word of life.

And if you've read the gospel of John, you might remember John chapter one from the beginning in the beginning was the word. And so it's almost the exact same way to start and the gospel of John and first John here.

And this is very likely written well after the gospel of John and it's probably the case that John is the very last living apostle when he writes this letter.

[1 : 03] And so you can ask, you know, when you're the last apostle, it's the very end of the apostolic age and you say, well, what is the very last apostle want to say to the next generation of Christians when the apostles, those who saw Jesus rise from the dead, when they're all gone and John, this is what John gives us, exactly what John gives us.

And you know, as you say, what do you want to say to us, John, at the end of the apostolic age? And he says it right here in verses one to four. He gives you here the very purpose of Christianity, the entire point, the core of Christianity.

And you know, you might, we might ask today in 2022 as modern 21st century people, why read the Bible? Why get up on Sunday and come to a worship service?

Why pray? Why put money as we do into so many ministries? And here it is, it's right here in verse three, John tells you exactly the answer. He says, so that you might have fellowship with God like I have.

And so he says here that the apostles, we, he said, we found fellowship with the living God. Do you want that?

[2 : 17] Is that you too? You know, do you want what John had found, fellowship with the living God? And so let's ask what that is, how to find it and how to have more of it.

Okay, so first, what is it? Fellowship with God. I was talking last week with a member, an attendee here at our church and she said that she was having a casual conversation about her faith at work. And her coworker said, you know, I just, something like I just don't see why you need religion in order to have a happy life. Now look, that's incredibly common in a place like Edinburgh. We've all heard something like that from people and people will say, I can have a good life, a healthy life, a happy life without, without being devout, without being religious.

And sometimes there, you know, there's two different meanings to that. One of the meanings is I don't need organized historic religion. You know, I don't need to step into a church building in order to have a happy life, but maybe I'm spiritual.

But the other meaning with that is I don't need a life of faith at all. I don't need to be spiritual at all in order to have a happy life. Now I think if the apostle John was still alive, if he was here in 2022, imagine that.

[3 : 31] I think if you, if, if somebody said that to him, he would say something like this, sure. You know, you, you don't need Christianity to have a happy life.

You know, this is empirically obvious. It's empirically obvious to all of us. You can, you don't need religious faith to have a good time on a Saturday night. You don't need religious faith to enjoy the

ring, the ring of power, the new net, the new Netflix and Amazon series.

You know, you don't, you don't need faith for that. You don't need faith to have financial security. You don't need faith to find comforts. But what John would come to you, to all of us today, to the modern person in Edinburgh and say is, but do you want, but do you want more than little happinesses?

Do you want fulfillment? Do you want joy verse four? Joy is when you're sad, but you're still full of hope. And so what he says here is, do you want true religion, not just religion, true religion, which is real fulfillment?

Do you want, do you want it? And so he comes to say exactly what the answer is. You know, have you heard it said, I don't need faith to have happiness? And John asks you here, do you want everlasting joy?

[4 : 43] Do you want more than happiness? Do you want something else? Fellowship with God is core Christianity. It is the point of what we gather for.

It is the point for which Jesus came into the world. It's the very centerpiece. J.H. Bavink is a Dutch philosopher and theologian from the middle of the 20th century.

And he talked about this. He said that there's something in every single human being, something in every one of us that he called the magnetic points of the human heart.

There's a way that the human heart, by nature of just being human, points to these norths. In other words, looks for answers that it cannot find. This is how he said it.

Let me read it to you. He said, we humans, by virtue of our place in the world, must always and everywhere give answers to the same questions. We must struggle with the basic problems which our existence entails.

[5 : 40] We are afflicted by grief and by misfortune. We know adversity, but then we know prosperity. Deep in our hearts, we have a vague feeling of responsibility.

We're aware that we're only small beings and in a measurable greatness of the universe. We know very well that sooner or later death will knock at our door. Wherever we go, we are surrounded by a multitude of questions.

And although we have the power to escape from them for just a moment, we cannot help but being overwhelmed by these riddles. Our life is a riddle that threatens to crush us.

Now he called these the magnetic points. Let me distill them to you in four questions. This is what they are. What do I do with my suffering? What do I do with my pain? What do I do with the moral weight that I feel pressing in on me, my guilt?

Is there meaning for such a small thing as I in such a vast cosmos? Is there a purpose to my life? Is there a way to live or is death my only future?

[6 : 44] These are the magnetic questions that the directions our hearts always have to go. They're the riddles of life, the questions we can't get out from underneath. And at the end, he says here that we use coping mechanisms to try to run from them, to try to escape facing them as they really stand before us.

John comes to you today and says that there's a secret to life. There's a secret. And the secret is this. Every single one of the questions is answered because you were made for fellowship with God.

You were made by God for fellowship with God. Now this word fellowship, I want to give you the Greek term that stands underneath it because it's very famous and many of you will probably know it.

It's the word koinonia. You've heard it. There's a lot of churches in America named koinonia Baptist or something like that. It's a well-known word. When we use it to talk about other people, our relationship with each other, it's often translated to hospitality.

So fellowship with God or hospitality or hospitality with other people, that's how it's often used. There's a synonym. Let me say this first.

[7 : 51] Fellowship with God answers the intellectual questions, the riddle of life, but it's more than that. It's much more than that. And let me tell you two things that it is here before we move on.

The first thing is found in the synonym for this word and you can see it in verse two. He says that this life was made manifest and we have seen it and we testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life.

The eternal life is the synonym. It's the same thing having the eternal life as fellowship with God. And the reason we know that is because John has a thesis statement in his gospel and it's John 17 verse three, very famous moment where he says, this is eternal life to know God.

And so here's how it works. Eternal life is fellowship with God and fellowship with God and eternal life both mean to know God and that means that fellowship with God means to know God.

To know God and that's not just intellectual, that's deeply personal. To know God is deeply personal. I was reading one writer this week who had a quote from an 18th century, 19th century I should say Methodist preacher named Daniel Steele and this is what Daniel Steele said about his experience of knowing God.

[9 : 17] He said, almost every week and sometimes every day, the pressure of God's great love comes down upon my heart. Here it again, almost every week, sometimes every day, the pressure of God's great love comes down to my heart with the light of his radiant presence, the spot before untouched has now been reached and all of its hardness has melted away in the present of that universal solvent, love divine, all loves excelling.

Now you hear what he's saying? He's saying, Daniel was saying, sometimes, sometimes I have a moment where the love of God hits me so hard that I'm melted, that I'm undone.

It's when I say I'm undone before God yet he loves me so much that my heart is melted before him and that's what it means to have fellowship with God. It's more than intellectual, it's answering the great magnetic questions, the riddles of life but it's more than that.

It's to know the living God personally. It's when you come to a place in your life where you say, who am I that you would think of me, God? Who am I that you would think of me?

And yet you do. For all the times that I've ignored you in my daily life, you think of me, you've come down for me, you love me. It's when the love of God melts your heart and so the first thing to know is to have fellowship with God is to know God personally.

[10 : 48] It's to be in relationship with the living God. It's to have your heart melted by his love. Secondly, and this brings us to point number two, we have to also see how you can find it and this is the second aspect of fellowship with God.

How do you find fellowship with God? Secondly, and John tells us here that first you've got to look in the right place for it. You've got to look in the right place.

Now in order to understand what he says here in the first and second verses, clearly you have to know that most of the letter of John is actually written to push back against a group of teachers that were present probably in the area of Ephesus at the very end of the first century AD.

And John is writing to remind the church of the gospel that he had preached and we know a little bit more about them than John gives us. You know what you have to do to figure out exactly who he's talking about?

You have to go through, you can do this, you go through, you pour through the letter and you look at all the places where he's countering something subtly and you can start to put it together and say, ah, this must have been what the opponents were teaching at the time.

[12 : 05] And then we know from a couple of John's own disciples, some guys that he discipled, one by the name of Polycarp, a little bit more about who these folks were and we think probably that they were a group of people that are later going to be called the Ebionites.

That name's not important at all. What they were teaching was quite simple. You can see it actually very subtly in 1 John 4 verse 2. He says, by this you know the spirit of God.

How do you know if the spirit of God, what you're hearing is true? Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.

Now it's subtle, but listen, what he's saying there is that there's probably a group of teachers that he's opposing that were saying, the Jesus that you've seen, first century people in flesh, this human being is not the Christ of God.

In other words, that he's not from God and of God or co-eternal with God, that he's just a man.

That's what they were teaching. And what they said even more was that, okay, John said this, but do you want to have fellowship with God, here's how you get it.

[13 : 17] Here's how you get it. Jesus is a great moral teacher. And you need to come underneath him. You need to follow him because what happened in the Gospels, they say, is that Jesus was so holy, he was so morally good before God, that God accepted Jesus as his son.

Jesus was a normal human, but then God looked and said, that man is particularly great among all people. And so he said, I'm adopting him as my special son, and I'm going to use him as the great example to the world of how to live.

And so the Ebeonites were saying that. They were saying, look, have you heard this before? I don't need religion. I don't need devout faith.

I don't need a historic Christianity to have a happy life, but I really do like Jesus, the moral teacher. I really do find that Jesus is a great example.

I look at him and I think, I want to live my life like that, but I don't need this. I don't need the rest of it. I don't need this. I don't need historic Christianity in any other way to be happy.

[14:20] And look, John is saying first, here's how not to find fellowship with God. He's saying that, well, there's nothing new under the sun.

You come and say today, science has now shown us. We now know that the miracles and all the extra stuff in the Gospels that couldn't be real, that really what we have to do with Jesus is that we have to go with him.

We have to look for the good bits, which is his great moral teaching, love one another, love God, love neighbor as you love yourself. And John was dealing with that in the very first century, that there's nothing new under the sun.

And here's what John says. He comes and says, that's how not to find fellowship with God. Here's how to find fellowship with God. You see what he's doing in verse one and two? He's countering that teaching.

And how does he say it? What does he say? First, that which was from the beginning, that which was from the beginning, the word of life. And so immediately he's trying to say, remember the Gospel, John chapter one, the Gospel of John, where I said to you, the man that I knew was from the very beginning, in the beginning in fact.

[15:29] In other words, he was there saying, he is the Creator God, co-eternal with the God that you know, the Father, that he is so much the Creator that he is God himself.

That was John one. That's why he starts this way. But then what does he go to secondly? He says, that which we have heard, seen, looked upon, touched concerning the word of life.

And you see what he's doing? He's saying to the Ebeonites and to all of us and to every modern person that struggles with this today. He's saying, look, if you want to say Jesus was just a great moral teacher, you can't do that.

You can't just do that. Because he's saying, we the apostles were there and we first saw, we first heard, he starts with hearing, we first heard his teaching.

Then we saw his actions. Then we looked upon, why, repeat vision twice because he's saying secondly, we gazed. We first saw what he did.

[16:29] He brought Jairus' daughter up from the dead. But then we gazed and said, who is this? And then it says, and then we moved from there and we touched him.

And he's remembering there. He's remembering that Jesus said, I will give my life away and in three days I will take it back again. And he's saying, do you know that I touched him?

I touched him. And there were many, many witnesses, more than 500 and every one of the apostles is going forth saying the same thing. And so here's what John's doing. He's saying to the Ebeonites, he's saying to the modern person who says, Jesus is just a great moral teacher and that's enough for me.

He's saying, you can't do that. Because I'm telling you that I looked upon him, I touched him, I saw him, that there is a historic audible, visible, tangible appearance of the eternal God that has come into history.

And he's saying, that's the claim I'm making. And so you can reject that claim, but you have to at least pass through it. You can't just say, well, Jesus was a great moral teacher.

[17:34] He's, no, all the eyewitnesses said otherwise. And so at least you have to wrestle with it. At least you have to be willing to walk through that claim and decide what to do with that claim, that Jesus Christ is not just a great moral teacher.

He is God come into history itself, that he died and that he rose again from the dead. If a man in the middle of history rose from the dead and there were eyewitnesses, you've got to wrestle with that. You've got to do something with that. You've got to either bow before that man or totally reject him. There's no way to just go about and say, well, he was just a great moral teacher. And so this is what

John says to move to our final point.

He says, remember John 17, 3, this is eternal life. This is fellowship with God to know God. And then he adds this. And to know his son, Jesus Christ, sent from the Father.

What is fellowship with God? What is John saying? He's saying, you've got to look in the right place for it. And the right place is through this man. God become man.

[18:36] God enter into history. God who said, I will give up my life and I will take it back again in three days. That this is the appearance of the living God into human history and that this is where you must go to find real fellowship with the living God.

John is saying, listen, modern person, I'm not telling you a fable. I'm telling you a history. And Peter in 2 Peter 1 16, he remarks that even in the first century, the Greek enrollment mythologist understood that they were creating stories, fables.

But that's not at all the genre that John's giving us here. He's giving us history. And we've got to wrestle with it. Now finally, finally, how to grow, how to have this, how to grow into this?

Let me give you three ways. Let me give you three ways as we close. One, I've already said it, but to have fellowship with God, real fellowship is to believe in the age of life.

All right, one more thing about eternal life. Ever since the 17th century, we've been translating this little phrase eternal life as eternal life, which is a very good way to translate it.

[19:50] In the Greek text, it's very literally, it says the age of life, the age of life. And so the word age or ages is often translated as eternal.

And that's significant. I was reading an author this week who was talking about the early Soviet era in Russia.

And there was a journalist named Nicholas Stephens, 1919 traveled to this very early Soviet Union and he came back, he looked at it and he came back and he said, I have seen the future and it works.

He said, he saw early Soviet Russia and he said, I've seen the future and it works. Now you remember that future, that future turned out to be the Soviet gulag and the deaths, the deaths of millions and millions of people.

And that's just one example among many that no human government, no human society can ever offer this very specific word here, the age of life.

[21:00] That even in the best human society, we're still under the domain of the age of death, not the age of life, all of us, injustice is abound.

And Augustine very famously put it so well when he said, the city of man can never be the city of God. Never, not in this life. Look, if you put your hope in something from this life like a politic, a government, your bank account, whatever it may be to fulfill you, then just know that you have religion, you have a life of faith, you have something that you've put your hope in, your trust in, that you think is going to fulfill you, bring for you the age of life and it will not, it will disappoint you, it will end.

It is the age of death. We're underneath it because of our sin. We're underneath the age of death. And here, here John says, John 17, to know God is eternal life, to have fellowship with God is eternal life, the age of life.

To have fellowship with God is the age of life, meaning that if you know Jesus personally, you have the age of life, not death.

And how do you have it? And I'll end this first one with Paul. Paul says it like this, here's how you have it. If you believe on Christ today, you are so united to the age of life himself that when Jesus Christ died, it's as if you died there that day.

[22:29] Your sin died, your guilt died. It was crucified in him that you so have eternal life, the age of life, that when he rose from the dead, it's as if you have already risen beyond death.

It's so sure. That's the assurance you have unto the age of life. If you are united to the age of life, Jesus Christ, by simply believing. And that's how you have fellowship with God.

Secondly of three. That means then, that means you're a Christian, you know, that means that if you have that, you're a Christian and that means today we're all called as believers. If you're a believer today to then go forth and delight in his presence.

How do you grow in fellowship with God? Delight into his presence. More and more. In other words, we sang it in Psalm 63, seek his face.

And so let me just, let me offer you a quote from John Calvin. I love Calvin here. He's so helpful. He says, how difficult it is for us to believe. One of us knows too well by their own experience that it is hard to believe.

[23 : 36] Thank you, John. We love John for that. Look, are you a Christian today? And you say, you know, have you like me found times of prayer, times of reading scripture, times of worship stifling to your heart and difficult, difficult to really believe, difficult to fellowship with God when you're in the midst of worship, when you're in the midst of your Bible reading, the midst of your prayer life?

And if you say yes to that, then I would say who among us can cast the first stone? John Calvin wouldn't. And you see, in other words, well, let me ask you this question.

And I only ask you this because I know that this is my struggle. This is my heart. If you find yourself struggling with fellowship with God, abiding with God in worship and prayer and scripture and all the other ways, let me ask you this.

Are you practicing religion instead of seeking the face of God? In other words, are you praying, but you're not praying to God?

Are you reading, but you're not coming to hear God speak? Are you coming to worship, but you're not coming to worship God? Are you prepared for that when you come into this place?

[24 : 58] To worship God, not just to worship. And sometimes, let me say it fair enough, sometimes practicing religion is exactly the thing we need to do because that's as far as we can get emotionally, depending on where we are in life.

And at the same time, there's a challenge there to seek his face, to look for him, to approach the living God when you read, when you pray, when you worship.

Seek his face, that's fellowship with God, that's the path to growing in it. Finally, finally, John tells us in verse four that growing in fellowship with God is warning others to have fellowship with God.

Did you notice very subtly, we are writing these things to you so that our joy may be complete? He's talking about the apostles. Say, I representing the apostles write this about Jesus' history to you so that my joy might be full.

And so he's saying, you want to have more fullness, more fellowship with the living God. Do you joy and delight in God the more you see others joying and delighting in God?

[26 : 06] Do you want to extend the history of Jesus Christ to other people so that you might know the joy of fellowship with God even more alongside him with them? That's what John says.

John says, the more we give this gift to others, the more we share in it with brothers and sisters that believe, the more our joy goes up, the more we love God, the more we fellowship with God.

And so as a last word, as a last word, there's an example of this very, very precise example of this. Delighting in the presence of God and enjoying God more because we fellowship with other people who enjoy God and it all comes together.

Where does it all come together for the apostle Paul? First Corinthians 10. First Corinthians 10.

Paul uses the phrase, the word, coinonia, and he says, fellowship, the cup of blessing that we bless, is it not fellowship together in the blood of Christ?

The bread that we are about to break, is it not fellowship together in the body of Christ? And it's fellowship with God today by the Holy Spirit and fellowship with one another, coinonia.

[27 : 16] And so we grow in it more and more unto the joy of the living God. Will you take today and eat and drink the body and blood of Christ in order to fellowship, to know the presence of the living God through Jesus Christ?

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the history of Jesus and we ask today that you would help us to believe in the eyewitness testimony, Lord, that you would help us to believe the Christ of history is the Christ of faith.

And so move upon us now to know the resurrected Son of God as we come to celebrate your Lord's supper this morning. As we come to witness to the day that you will come to see us in person, in the flesh, in real history where we will break bread and drink wine with you.

We long for it. We say, Maranatha now, and we say, come and meet with us by the Holy Spirit in Christ's name. Amen.