

Love is Life

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Date: 28 September 2014

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[0 : 00] I don't need fellowship and I don't need the church. The church is a waste of time.

People in the church don't understand me and don't provide for me. I think I should give up on the church. Ordinary Christians just don't get it.

They should have specialist knowledge like me and they need that knowledge. They can't just carry on on their own without someone like me explaining things to them.

Jesus didn't become a... or God didn't become a human being literally in the flesh. Christ isn't an ordinary and real human being.

The message of the atonement, the cross, well, that's absolutely outdated. We need to move forward with the times and learn that our thinking and our understanding of humanity and our goodness has moved beyond such kind of course and rough teaching.

[1 : 15] These are just some of the kind of issues that John and other writers in the early church were up against in terms of the false teaching. We've been looking at false teaching in another of our sermon series and usually the letters were written in response to issues.

They weren't just kind of, well, I think I'll write a letter to the churches and they wrote a nice letter to the churches. There was usually a reason for them. There was usually a problem. There was usually false teaching and struggles happening that made things very difficult.

So these letters were written in response to that and John is no different. And that some of these kind of issues which I've maybe played modernised a little bit and broadened a little bit were some of the issues that would have been typical of the issues that John had to deal with.

It was written by John who had a close relationship with various churches to whom he was writing and they were general letters that were passed round the different churches.

But I don't really want to spend any time in that this evening. I want to go straight into the letter because the letter goes straight into the letter. There's not much introduction in it.

[2 : 36] It's just a punch right from the very beginning because things are very important. And we remember and we recognise that when we look at a church like this with some of its false teaching and some of the issues that they faced and some of the corrective teaching and the corrective focus, that's going to be exactly the same for us.

The corrective focus is going to be absolutely essential for us in our Christian lives as well. So because it's the Bible, because it's God's living word, it remains eternally always relevant to us. It's never going to be outdated and that's partly what we're going to look at this evening. So can we start by looking at the introduction with the heading, no introduction. So there's no introduction really in this letter.

There's no hello, how are you all doing? I'm John, I'm a beloved apostle and things are going well. There's none of that kind of introductory few words he goes straight into. That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched.

It's kind of unusual, it's unusual among all the letters in the New Testament and there's very little introduction. But that's because I believe he looks for powerful impact.

[3 : 47] It's a bit like his gospel. There's nothing about Jesus' birth and there's nothing about the manger and his childhood. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.

And it goes straight into the kind of meat of the character and the nature of Jesus. And so here he's doing the same. There's no formalities. He wants to get straight down to the real beginnings of what he wants to say.

The real beginnings aren't in formal introductions. He's got a message and he's saying and founding all his teaching on this truth, that things, the gospel and the truth of the gospel has been the same since the beginning.

That's what he wants to say. That which was from the beginning and he begins his letter saying that because that's hugely significant and important to him. And what he wants to stress by way of introduction is that God's purpose in the gospel has always been the same right from the very beginning.

It's always been the same. It's never changed. It's not like that halfway through the book of Kings or Isaiah that God said, well, things just aren't working out.

[5 : 06] We'll need to change the whole gospel. We'll need to send my son and try and work out something better. There hasn't been and has never been like that. God's purpose has never changed. His mind has always been set and through the centuries, the gospel is always and will always remain the same.

And the truth of the gospel and our need for the gospel will always remain the same. You never sophisticated beyond the gospel. You never sophisticated into something more radically smooth than the gospel because the gospel remains the same.

And today that's good for us, isn't it? Because everything changes. We're in the fastest changing society that has ever been. And it's only going to get faster. It's not going to get slower.

My next, if God blesses us with another 25 years, will be a lot faster. Well, it's a lot faster anyway when you get older. But I mean society will change a lot more than they did in the first 25 years.

When we first got married, you just had big bricks to speak to in the phone. And it was wired up and it was in the hallway. You couldn't walk about with it and you had to turn something to get the number. Things have changed radically and dramatically and will continue.

[6 : 22] But God doesn't and the message doesn't and salvation doesn't. So he is like we were singing a rock. He is not going to change.

And so he becomes the rock that is hugely significant and trustworthy. And his purpose doesn't change. We don't need to sit down once a year as a church or as a denomination or as a religion and say, well, how can we change the gospel to make it more relevant?

And how can we make it more appealing? Because it is reliably the same. And his commitment to that gospel is the same. I must be feeling in very reflective mood this evening.

Because 50 years ago, roughly just over 50 years ago, I was born in a house in Corpuch near Fort William. And that house has over these years changed dramatically.

It has changed ownership. It is no longer a man's which it was then. It was a guest house and other things. It has been painted and different people staying in it. So every decade there has been a huge change in the house.

[7 : 30] But if I was to have taken a photograph every year or maybe every 10 years, every decade of that house, there would be one thing that would be unchanging in it all the time.

That would be Ben Nevis in the background. Ben Nevis in the background never changes. Some of the photos would be in black and white. Then there would be colour and there would be different people outside. A wee fat curly-headed boy at the front.

And that would be my brother. And then it would be all kinds of things. But Ben Nevis would just be the same. And if you took a photograph today, Ben Nevis would be the same as was 50, 100, a thousand years ago.

And that is kind of the reality that John wants to remind his people of because they are being tempted to change the gospel, they are being tempted to move away from Jesus. And he is saying, look, the truth doesn't change.

The picture of God doesn't change. That beginning that Jesus was from the beginning, that the gospel was from the beginning, that the cross was in God's head and heart from the beginning is crucial to us because we are living in a world which is telling us all the time, change.

[8 : 41] Change the gospel. Change the way you think. Change the atonement. Get rid of these things. Move on. Develop, mature. And John here says no.

So we have this truth at his deepest level not changing. What's the truth that he is particularly unpacking here? Well, it really is that God is life and then other stuff that comes from that.

This is what we proclaim concerning the word of life. The life appeared, we have seen it and we testify and we proclaim to you the eternal life. That's really what is founding his teaching on here,

that God is life, God is eternal, God is the giver of life, God is the author of life, God is life. That's his theme in many ways, that life for us we can take comfort from the fact that life isn't random this evening. We haven't just come here together and it's just a random coming together of people.

It's not chance that brings us here. Life is not naturalistic. Your life at no level is independent of others but primarily of God.

[10:02] You and I and we are derived. Life is derivative in other words and it's derivative with source coming from God.

So God is the source of life and of our life. So without God, this is stating the obvious, clearly stating the obvious, but without God there would be no existence.

So the breath that we have to curse him and to apologize for atheism and for secularism, it comes from him. So without God there would be no existence.

All life flows from him. So we come this evening to church and if we don't learn anything else this evening in church, we will learn that we will need to bow our heads and give thanks. That we are here today, this moment we got up this morning because God has given us life.

He has chosen that we live today and life comes from him. Every tick of the clock is from this author of life who is God.

[11:10] Now that immediately, if you're already thinking, and I'm sure you are, I'm sure everyone's thinking here, that already means something very significant. It means that death is a spiritual problem because it relates to God who is life.

So the opposite of life is death and that means it's kind of the opposite of God and it's the opposite of what God is. If life is from God, then death is what has brought separation from God.

It has brought dis-peace. Peace and life is in relationship with God. Sin has brought in dis-peace and death and brokenness, which we saw very clearly this morning in the presentation that we had of the brokenness of the world in which we live.

So there's immediately in that theological claim of God being life a link to the sin and tension that has brought death into our existence, into our lives.

So he goes on from that to say that this God who is life, and in seeing God like life, is he not bigger than? Maybe this evening you've come in and he's just become a little bit bigger.

[12:33] When we think of him as being the author of life and the sustainer of life, and yet we're told that this great God, he appears.

Okay, people say, well, God is here. Where is he? Who is God then? Let's see him. Let's touch him. Let's feel him. And John says that's exactly what happened.

Into death and into the brokenness and into the picture of the world that we received this morning, Jesus Christ comes.

The life as God appeared. John says we have seen it. It's interesting he uses, in personal pronoun here, uses it. There may be various reasons for that, which I'm not going to go into.

Which I have read about, but haven't fully understood. The life appeared, we have seen it and testified to it. It's referring to life, I guess, at that level. And we proclaim to you the eternal life, which is with the Father, and has appeared to us.

[13:37] And so there's this amazing picture of a great God who is the author of life, who appeared into the darkness and separation, into the death world, into the death platform, into the death universe, in the flesh, in reality.

John is really insistent on that fact. Because one of the false teachings of the day was that Jesus didn't really come into flesh.

He wasn't really a human being, he was a kind of ghost figure. It wasn't real. And John says, no, look, I've seen touched, or hands have touched.

We've looked at. The word for touch there is a really strong word for close, close, close examination. Not just brushed past, but really closely examined.

You think of the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus, where he says, you know, to doubting Thomas, you know, come and touch me. Feel me, feel who I am. And Jesus himself was saying, look, you know, you need to touch and see that I'm real.

[14:45] And this is the one who John knew we read about in the story of the crucifixion, that John's account of the crucifixion, where Jesus on the cross gives the oversight of his mother to John, his beloved disciple.

And John says, I was there, you know, I lived and I saw him. I ate with him and just slept beside him and we drank together and I saw his miracles. I was there when he was transformed and he became more like this God who is life and God who is life.

And I listened to his teaching. I could see him, this God who comes. And it's more than just life, isn't it, that Jesus comes.

It's more than just walking the earth. It's more than just teaching and miracles and example and insight. Because he died. Now that is remarkable.

God is life. God dies. He dies on the cross. That is the greatest paradox, the greatest oxymoron, the greatest mystery we could ever consider, that God who is life dies on a cross.

[16:04] But he obviously and clearly in the teaching that is from the beginning is that he has done the impossible in our place.

The author of life takes the sin in the curse for our sin, the judgment in the curse for our sin on himself.

He undergoes separation. My God, my God, why? Because we don't offer the way back. That's the gospel. That is what is from the beginning.

That is what God knew about before the foundation of the world. That is what is prophesied in Isaiah 53, clearly pointing forward to this remarkable, scary, frightening, unbelievable work of God that caused him to feel forsaken.

He is life. And yet this life is the one who has revealed himself as an incarnate God in the flesh who dies and who rises again.

[17:13] And that message is a message and not just the message really, and I want to emphasise that. It's not just a message that we share, but it's the life.

It's the life restored that is shared. And that is from the beginning. That is very important that when we become Christians, we move from death to life.

You know, that's how significant it is. We move from being not a people to being a people, and that can't be changed. That's the message of the gospel is that we move as Christians from death to life. You know, you can't tinker with that, can you? You certainly can't better it. You can make it a lot worse. You can kind of shrink it down to being something rubbish.

But we can't make it better. And that is why John is so protective of this message. And he says, this life appeared, we have seen it.

[18:16] We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard. And this life appeared, we have seen it and testified to it. And that is speaking of the fact that what has been from the beginning is something that we don't just keep to ourselves.

We don't just come into churches and say, glumbas on a Sunday and close the door, and talk about this and then go away as if nothing happened. It's something that we are to share. John testifies, and that's a unique usage of that word because it's speaking of actual literal witnesses.

So he's a witness to this Jesus he touched and he felt him and he saw him and he knew he was there. And he was a witness. That's where the original apostles all had to be those who had seen Jesus and who were there around Jesus.

And so he was an actual witness, he was there. He experienced Jesus. He was there with Jesus. But then he was not only experienced Jesus and testified, he proclaims Jesus.

In other words, he sent with a message to proclaim and to share this truth. So what John is saying is saying, which from the very beginning, the apostolic foundational truths of the gospel will never be changed.

[19:38] And it's not simply the proclamation of a philosophy or a nice way of living or moralism or specific intellectual insight that some people might have.

He said, good news of life. That's the gospel. It's a message of life. It's a message of love that Jesus Christ came because he loves us and he died on the cross for our sins.

And he gives us his grace. He gives us his forgiveness. He gives us his acceptance. He gives us his righteousness. He gives us life.

And that is hugely significant. What I just want to finish with is from this section, the practical outworking of that.

Because they never are divorced, never say, I would never want anyone here to say, well, theology does really matter to me. I just have this kind of personal relationship with God.

[20 : 44] Because theology is the knowledge of God. And the knowledge of God will impact the life that we live for God and help us to understand it.

All right, for the very last time, I'll use a personal illustration. I'll not do this ever again, but since it's our anniversary. If I'd got married to, you know, 25 years ago and said, yeah, that was great. And I had gone and lived separately for the next 25 years.

I would have been a rubbish marriage. We wouldn't have any kids. And I wouldn't have got to know her. And, you know, the same is true of a relationship with God and Christ that we come to Him. And the very blessing of life that He gives us is to know Him, to glorify Him, to serve Him, to understand who He is. And so the knowledge of Him will affect how we live.

And I hope that will make sense as I draw to an end. Because John here gives two very interesting expressions of the gospel here, which we might not immediately...

[21 : 47] Well, we might, but we might not immediately make if we are asked to explain the gospel. What if you were asked to explain the gospel to anyone? Or are the outworking of the gospel in your life?

How would you explain it? Well, John does it using two words here, fellowship and joy. So he explains the gospel in these two ways, that the outworking of this life that we're given, of this salvation that Jesus gives us as believers, is stated in relational terms.

Now, we know the gospel is reconciliation with God, don't we? We know it's moving from this peace to peace, from darkness to light, from life to death. And John spends a lot of time in these kind of contrasts.

But here he speaks of it as fellowship with the Father and the Son. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us, our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ.

So the result of the gospel then, of what Jesus has done, of us being Christians, is we have fellowship with the Father and the Son. And what is fellowship?

[23 : 00] We say, come round, come round and we'll have some fellowship. It sounds like you have a slice of it with a cup of tea. But it's the most soft, misused, abused word in the English language.

Fellowship is not getting together and having the crack. Fellowship is not just being in the company of Christians. Fellowship is not gossiping about one another, to one another, and then ending up with a prayer and a Bible reading.

That's not fellowship. Fellowship is spiritual friendship with Jesus Christ and God the Father and the Son at the core of that friendship. So that our friendship and our relationship is governed by seeking God's glory and by relating to one another through our relationship with the Father and the Son. It's a spiritual walk, in other words. It's a walk in the light. It's a walk in a place called peace. It's a walk in spiritual friendship with the Father.

And that's new and that's different and that's core. The question that's not based on a head knowledge of truth you have, is based on you for the first time in your life having fellowship with God that you've never had before.

[24 : 12] And fellowship of love, fellowship you want, fellowship you crave, fellowship you look for, fellowship with the Father and with the Son through the Holy Spirit. Maybe for the first time you see God as your friend, not as an ogre, not as a master that is frightening and capricious, but as someone who is good and loving and just and holy.

And so it's fellowship on these terms and John goes on to speak about what that looks like a little bit later and I'll not go into that this evening. But it's fellowship with the Father and the Son, but if you notice I inverted it, because actually John said first, John said so that you may have fellowship with us and fellowship with God the Father.

So it involves fellowship with God, and also has a, there's a vertical relationship which affects our horizontal relationships with one another.

So that grace and the gospel and what has been unchanged since the beginning is that the gospel affects and Jesus affects and life that he gives affects our relationships with one another so that there's light and peace and grace that is really important in our relationships with one another, primarily with the family of God, because it's to be a spiritual fellowship, not just the friendship of the people we like, the people that are the same as us, the people that are like us and vote the same way and think the same way and are the same way, but a fellowship that is based around the Lord

Jesus Christ, around forgiveness and peace.

Now isn't that interesting? Because so much of our lives as Christians with one another are marked by dis-peace, not peace.

[26 : 03] The very opposite of what Christ came to do, we gossip about one another, we talk badly, we complain, we're jealous, we're envious, we judge, we look down, we're proud, we're self-righteous.

So much of our relationships are not based on peace, not based on holiness, not based sometimes, sorry, I shouldn't say that, I should say a lot of my relationships sometimes are based in that way, I make no judgement on others, and the reality is we don't take the grace and the life and the fellowship with Father and apply it to our horizontal relationship. Why is that? Because it's far harder.

We don't need to ask for God, we don't need to wait for God to ask for forgiveness. We don't need to be patient with Him because in the sense that He will do something wrong with us or will sin. Obviously He's perfect, but with one another we don't see, we don't understand. People need to be dealt with patiently, we're sinned against, and there's a million different ways in which fellowship can be broken, isn't there?

And that was really one of the problems that John was faced in chapter 2 and verse 19. He says they went out from us but they didn't really belong to us, for if they belonged to us they would have remained with us, but they are going, showed that none of them belonged to us, and there was this problem of people just separating, not staying together, not being in fellowship, not grinding out grace in relationship with one another.

[27 : 46] It's tough, but it's life, and it's good because it's from God. So there's fellowship with the Father and fellowship with one another, and that's one, and the last thing is joy.

If I'd put a paper before this evening's service and said, describe the gospel or the results of the gospel in your life as a Christian with two words, I wonder if it would have been fellowship and joy? Probably not. I don't think it would have been mine.

But here John is reminding that fellowship with God, and can I just say about fellowship with God when you're struggling? What we tend to do when we're struggling spiritually is we distance ourselves from God.

When we're struggling spiritually we move away from Him, but that's the time we need Him most. That's when we will find life, when we go back to Him. Coming away from Him is death and darkness.

It's understandable, I know, but it's death and darkness, and we all do it. But life will drive us passionately, even when our feet are wanting to go that way, drive us towards Him because He is life, and because that has been from the beginning. But related to that then is joy.

[29 : 13] We write this to make our joy complete, so that the fellowship with God and living in the light and being Christian is also about joy, because it's about peace and it's about forgiveness and it's about not being tense and aggressive and distanced from one another or from God, and that is joy inducing.

You see the Samu song, Psalm 51, restore to me the joy I once had. He knew that that was missing. He knew he had turned away from his father. He knew he had moved away from the light and he was in the darkness, and there was no joy there.

Now if we're living today in our Christian life and there's no joy, what are we doing? Are we shaking our fists to heavenward and saying, God give me back my joy? Or there's no joy in following you? Are we making the wrong statements and are we asking the wrong questions? Are we walking the wrong way? Because he promises through his word that fellowship with the Father and the Son and with one another will bring joy in our lives, and it might be inexplicable joy.

Now in this life it will be mixed, it will be a struggle, and it will not be complete joy, because I believe that complete joy is what will mark heaven.

[30 : 47] Now a lot of us struggle with the concept of heaven and the teaching on heaven and what it means, but I absolutely believe it will be complete joy.

Whatever else it will be, it will be complete joy because it will be completely sin-free, and it will be a complete peace, and it will be absolute fellowship between each other and between the Father and His Son through the Spirit, joy.

So the more we are like heaven here as a community, the more joyful we will be. Not a slapstick, but joyful, deep-seated, heart-focused joy.

And the further we are from the Father, the less joyful we will be. And I don't mean in any way to minimise the struggles in the battles that we face day to day, but God promises a joy even in the midst of the darkness and the battles that we face in fellowship with Him, because we share life with Him and reconciliation and forgiveness, and the cancer of sin is dealt with.

That's why John doesn't say, hello, I'm doing fine. How are you all? He goes straight in and says, that which is from the beginning.

[32 : 14] It's so important. He gets to this message which has never changed and which will never change. And if we change, if we change the message, if we try and modernise it or try and accommodate modern thinking, in order to make it more acceptable, we will lose fellowship and we will lose joy.

And that's a battle for us. And we need each other to do that. Let's bow our heads and pray. Father God, we ask and pray that you would help us to live the life you want us to live.

We can only do that by grace. It's not an act that we can do naturally. It's impossible. We ask for your salvation. We ask for your righteousness to cover us.

We ask if there are any here this evening who aren't Christians, that they will have their eyes open tonight for the first time, that they will run to Jesus. Run to Jesus.

And we pray that you would help us when we struggle, when it's a battle, when we are drawn to the darkness rather than the light, and when we scorn the way of grace and fellowship with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, when we rather the company of fools to the company of the living God.

[33 : 40] And forgive us when our fellowship is quite the opposite, when it is harsh, judgmental, uncaring, disinterested, self-absorbed, when we have no time for those for whom Christ has died.

And our lives are on a pedestal looking down in judgment and others. Help us to be humble.

And the more grace that we seek and experience, may it be the more joyful we become and the more useful we are in the kingdom of God.

We thank you for John's urgency. We thank you for his own relationship with Jesus and for his teaching, for him being a channel of the teaching, the inspired word of God coming through him. We thank you for that.

So bless us this evening and bless the young people as they may be discussed, but more practically some of the issues that arise from this introduction. And may you bless them. And may they never depart from what has always been, from the beginning, the foundation of their faith.

[34 : 53] May they grow in their time here. May they be protected from the evil one. May they not choose the way of sin and often the easy broad road that leads to destruction.

So help us God we pray in Jesus name. Amen.