

The Word of Life

1 John 1:1-4

John & His Letters

John was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus (*Matthew 10:2-4*). Along with Peter and his brother James, John was part of Jesus' inner circle of disciples (*Mark 5:37; 9:2; 14:33*). John was a prominent leader of the early Christian church (*Galatians 2:9*). According to tradition, he became the bishop of the church at Ephesus.

John wrote the gospel of John, the letters of John (1, 2, and 3 John), and Revelation. 1 John was likely written between AD 85 and 95 (after the gospel of John), making it one of the last New Testament writings. Apparently, the recipients of the letter had been influenced by false teaching.¹ John wrote to expose this false teaching, and also to give the believers a measure of assurance concerning their relationship with God.

Proclamation: The Incarnation² was Real!

1. Read 1 John 1:1-4. What is “the Word of life?” What is “the life?” But first, how can we find the answers to these questions?³



📖 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (*John 1:1, 14, NIV*)

📖 “In him (Christ) was life” (*John 1:4a, cf. 1 John 5:11-12*)

📖 Jesus said, “I am ... the life” (*John 11:25; 14:6*)

📖 “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (*Hebrews 1:1-2a, NIV*)

2. What is John seeking to communicate to his readers? How does he substantiate (prove to be true) his message?⁴

¹ The false teaching is not specifically identified, but Bible scholars suspect an early form of Gnosticism, including the belief that spirit is good and matter is evil. Thus Christ only seemed to have a material body (Docetism), or else the spirit Christ joined the man Jesus at his baptism and left before he died (Cerithianism). This proto-Gnosticism affected not only beliefs concerning the nature of Christ, but also beliefs about salvation and morality.

² The ‘Incarnation’ should not be confused with ‘reincarnation.’ At a particular time in history (6-4 BC), the eternal Son of God (God the Son) took on human flesh as a unique, one-time (but continuous) identification with humanity.

³ First we should seek to understand the phrases in their immediate context. Then we can look at other occurrences of the words or phrases in 1 John, other writings of John, and the New Testament in general. Still interpretations may differ. Some Bible scholars say ‘the Word of life’ is Christ (the NIV indicates agreement by capitalizing ‘word’). John 1:1-14 uses ‘the Word’ in this sense. Others say ‘the word of life’ is the message concerning Christ (John R.W. Stott, *The Letters of John* [Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988], 72-23). Marshall says the phrase is probably deliberately ambiguous (I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978], 103). We could say the ‘word of life’ is God’s communication or revelation to us, and Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of God, and also the source and substance of life (abundant life, eternal life).

⁴ See footnote 2. John knows this is true because he and others were eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus Christ. They heard, saw, and touched Christ – the eternal Son of God who physically entered into our world.

3. Today, there are still various beliefs about Jesus Christ. Is John's testimony convincing today?⁵ Why or why not? What is needed for people today to accept John's proclamation?

📖 "Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed'" (*John 20:29, NIV*).

Purpose of Proclamation: Fellowship

John says, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, *so that you also may have fellowship with us*" (*1 John 1:3a, NIV, emphasis added*). The word "fellowship" means "having in common, sharing, participating together." True Christian fellowship is based in Jesus Christ. It is fellowship with God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ (*1:3b*).



Motivation for Proclamation: Joy

John says, "We write this to *make our joy complete*" (*1 John 1:4, NIV, emphasis added*). In other words, he "cannot be completely happy so long as some of those for whom he feels responsible are not experiencing the full blessings of the gospel (good news)." (*Marshall, 105*)

General Questions⁶

4. What does this Bible passage tell us about God? What does it say about who he is and what he does?
5. What does this Bible passage say about us human beings? What are we meant to be and what has gone wrong?⁷
6. What has God done about this and what does he expect of us in the light of what he has done? In other words, how should we respond?⁸

Reflection/Application

- What do you believe about Jesus? What is the basis for your belief? What do you think about John's testimony? If you have questions or doubts, humbly seek answers.
- As a believer, are you sharing *your* testimony? Do you share John's heart for others? Is your own joy "made complete" by helping others experience the full blessings of the gospel?
- This week, read 1 John keeping the above general questions in mind.

⁵ John offered direct eyewitness, hands-on, testimony concerning the historical person of Jesus Christ. Almost 2000 years later, such witnesses are hard to find! However, we do have written records of John and other direct eyewitnesses. So today we ask, 'Is the New Testament a reliable historical document?' See Jay's brief paper on this subject on the ICF website, or ask about the various resources concerning the historical Jesus and the reliability of the Bible. It should be noted that while historical evidence provides significant basis for the Christian faith, a person believes in response to the grace of God, and God uses various means in that process.

⁶ These questions were adapted from Justin Taylor's interview with Professor Gerald Bray for The Gospel Coalition. We will consider these questions as we study 1 John, though they will not always be written on the handout.

⁷ This question may seem difficult to answer based on only verses 1-4. However, we could say we are meant to be in 'fellowship' with God, but our fellowship with him has been broken or damaged because of our sin (*1:5-10*).

⁸ God has provided the way to be restored to fellowship with him. It is through faith in the Word who became flesh.