

# Eyewitness

## Letters from John, Part 1

### *1 John 1:1-4*

We happen to live in world – in a culture – of amazing variety where personal tastes and personal options abound over just about everything.

One of our global staff members, home on furlough, commented about how hard it was to get used to the grocery store – with so many choices and options regarding something as simple as cereal or even potato chips.

One author, originally from the Soviet Union, made the funny comment, where he wrote, “I wasn’t prepared for the incredible variety in my first trip to an American grocery store. While on my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk – you just add water, and you get milk – that was amazing! Then I saw powdered eggs – just add water and you get eggs. And then . . . I saw baby powder . . . and I thought what an amazing country!

Trouble is the idea of variety and personal options have now become the standard impression of spiritual matters as well.

According to one survey, 85% of households own at least one Bible; half of them now believe that the Bible, the Koran and the Book of Mormon are simply different varieties of the same basic truths.<sup>i</sup>

You can pick and choose without any spiritual consequence.

Whether or not Jesus was just a prophet, or an exalted man, or God in the flesh doesn’t really matter all that much – it’s just a different kind of cereal, but it’s still on the breakfast aisle.

Which is why this kind of statement can be made in a documentary on the Historical Jesus, where the host said, “The important thing is not what Jesus was or what He wasn’t – the important thing is what people believe Him to have been; a massive world-wide religion, numbering more than two billion people follow His memory – that’s pretty remarkable.”<sup>ii</sup>

Listen, if 2 billion people are following the memory of a delusional carpenter who claimed to be God incarnate – that isn’t remarkable, that’s really tragic!

The question about the nature and character and identity of Jesus Christ is as critical today as it was

when the Jewish High Court commanded Jesus, “Tell us, are you the son of God?”

And the answer is critical because the consequences are eternal.

If what Jesus said about Himself was true, then what He said about Heaven was true;

What He said about Hell is equally true

What He said about being the only way to get to God the Father was through Him . . . that is also true.

In a culture that revels in options and dislikes absolutes, the claims of Christ are eternally significant claims.

The American culture isn’t the only culture that wants a variety of beliefs to be equally validated.

In fact, by the time an old Apostle by the name of John sat down to write some letters, Hinduism and even Buddhism had made inroads into the Mediterranean world.

Already, Gnosticism was making converts from within the first century church. Gnosticism held that Jesus wasn’t really God incarnate – that God would never take on flesh and blood.

Then there was a new threat – a new option – called Docetism which believed that Jesus was a man upon whom the spirit of Christ descended, but at the crucifixion, Christ departed from Jesus.<sup>iii</sup>

Christ was a phantom, never really a part of Jesus. These optional views held that Jesus was just a man – He certainly couldn’t provide forgiveness or eternal life for anyone – and His body certainly didn’t rise again – and He certainly wasn’t God.

If there was ever a time when someone was needed who actually knew Jesus – who was an eyewitness to the historical Jesus – it would have been then.

In fact, if there was ever a time the gospel of Jesus Christ needed to be clarified, to a spiritual culture of options and personal tastes, it would be today.

Enter three letters from an eyewitness . . . an 80 year old man named John.

John and his older brother James were Jewish men who’d grown up to inherit the fishing business of their father, Zebedee.

Their mother, Salome, was actually the younger sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus which made John and James, cousins of Jesus. They would be among the first men called by Jesus to follow Him as His disciples.<sup>iv</sup>

John would have been the youngest of the Apostles and the only one to survive all the others and live to an old age.

Earlier he had written a gospel account of Christ. For 40 years he had remained quiet and out of sight.

But in his later years he wrote these three letters – I, II and III John. He was then exiled to the island of Patmos where he wrote the Book of Revelation. After his exile, he returned to his home in Ephesus where he served out the remaining years.<sup>v</sup>

Can you imagine the New Testament without the writings of John, the Apostle?

He wrote a Gospel; three Epistles and a prophecy.

- The Gospel of John presents the life of Christ;
- The letters of John proclaims the deity of Christ;
- The Book of Revelation prophesies the glory of Christ.

One author said that the Gospel of John takes you back to yesterday; the Epistles of John help you face today; and the Revelation of John unveils your tomorrow.<sup>vi</sup>

And get this – since John was given a personal tour of the future in heaven in the Book of Revelation; and because he walked with Jesus on earth throughout the Gospel account – watching Jesus die, seeing Him resurrected and alive – if anyone qualifies as an eyewitness of the past and present and future realities of Jesus Christ, it is this old man, named John.

In fact, this son of thunder, so nicknamed by Jesus years earlier, doesn't even begin with an introduction. He simply dives into his defense of who Jesus is . . . and it *will* matter for all of eternity!

And would you notice that his defense is built around the repeating claim that he . . . was . . . an . . . eyewitness!

You can't miss it.

### **1. Three evidences from an eyewitness**

In fact, he begins by giving three evidences of an eyewitness.

Notice the opening lines of 1 John – *verse 1*. ***What was from the beginning.***

Stop . . . you might write into the margin of your Bibles the words, “of His birth”.

John is talking about the beginning of Christ's life on earth – not the eternality of His divine being. John will get to that in the next verse.

But here John is referring to that momentous event when God the Son, incarnated through the Spirit conceived virgin, was born.

Fully God – fully man.

Having bypassed the semen of a male father, Jesus could have from Mary a human nature, without having a fallen nature; having been conceived by the Holy Spirit, He would have had a divine nature.

In the body of Jesus Christ was both a human nature and a divine nature.

He – humanity was the embodiment of deity – for within Him dwelt the fullness of God (Colossians 1).

Watch Him, as John did – there were times throughout His life that He was so much like God that You'd think He couldn't be a man; and there were times when He was so much like a man that you'd think He wasn't God.

But He was both – the God-man.

And John effectively says, “Take it from me – I'm an eyewitness!”

Let me tell you about three things I can attest to.

First, *verse 1 continues, We (I and the other Apostles) heard Him . . .*

In other word, I'm not repeating what others said He said – I was there to hear Him say it!

I heard Him teach on the hillsides and in the synagogues. I was there when the amazed audience said, “*We never heard anyone speak like this man speaks*” (John 7:46).

John can say, I heard Him utter His astounding claim, “*Before Abraham was, I am*” (John 8:58).

I heard Him in the garden of Gethsemane, when the crowd came armed with torches and swords to arrest Him and Jesus asked them, “Whom do you seek?” We seek Jesus the Nazarene.” And I heard Jesus respond, “I am!” I saw all of them immediately fall down on the ground at just the word of Jesus declaring He was the great I AM (John 18:6).

I heard Jesus stand in that boat and say to the wind and the waves, “Peace, be still” (Mark 4:39) – and all grew quiet again.

I heard Him stand before the grave and shout, “Lazarus, come forth . . . and Lazarus came back from the dead.” (

I was there . . . I heard him with my own ears. I can testify as an eyewitness to the words of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, John adds, we not only heard Him, *we have seen Him with our eyes, what we have looked at* . . .

In other words, He wasn't a phantom . . . a ghost . . . a figment of our imagination!<sup>vii</sup>

We saw the God-man with our own eyes.

John uses two different verbs for *looking* or *seeing* here in this phrase.

The second verb, translated "*looked at*" is from the word *theaomai* (θεαομαι) which gives us our word theater. It refers to careful contemplation, like you would carefully watch the actors upon a stage.<sup>viii</sup>

John effectively says, "Jesus was on the stage of human history and we carefully watched Him play out His role as the God-man."

The first verb in this phrase is even more instructive. John writes, "*what we have seen with our own eyes* . . ." – the verb to see here is from *horao* (οραω).

It means to see with understanding.<sup>ix</sup>

John used this word as a part of his own personal testimony where his faith crystalized into bedrock belief as God opened his eyes.

When he and the other Apostles were told that the body of Jesus was missing, John and Peter raced to the garden tomb.

John got there first and entered the tomb and saw the linen wrappings lying there – he saw them. The word is *blepo* (blepw) which is a common verb for casual observation.

Then the text records that Peter showed up and entered the tomb and saw the linen wrappings.

John uses a different verb "to see" which is from *theoreo* (θεωρεω) which means to puzzle . . . to scrutinize". *Theoreo* gives us the word theorize.

In other words, Peter's standing inside the tomb, looking at these grave clothes trying to figure out what happened.

Think about what they're both seeing.

The linen wrappings were not disheveled and thrown all around the tomb; in fact, they hadn't been ripped off by grave robbers – they are still lying there on that stone ledge, literally still in their folds.

After three days and three nights, these spices that had been wrapped into the linen grave cloths or strips – as they were wound around the body – would have begun to harden. When the disciples entered that tomb, they were both struck immediately by the grave cloths – in the form of a

body, slightly caved in and empty – like the empty cocoon of a caterpillar that had flown away.

The cloths hadn't been unwrapped . . . they weren't torn apart either.

The body had disappeared from within. At that moment, John writes in his gospel, that he came in for a closer inspection and he saw – a different verb – *he saw and believed*.

It's the verb for seeing and understanding what you're seeing. John put the puzzle together . . . Jesus Christ had come back to life.

And just as Jesus would have a glorified body that could move through closed doors – as He did in the upper room – and yet not be a ghost, but a real body that could eat fish – as Jesus will – so Jesus had literally moved from the inside out – of the grave cloths as He rose from the dead.

And so you have on that stone ledge the grave clothes in the form of a body, but there was no body inside.

John saw . . . with understanding . . . and believed.

That is the verb John uses in 1 John chapter 1 – *we saw Him* . . . that is, we watched Him and looked at Him and studied Him and saw Him with understanding of who He was.

Thirdly, the end of verse 1, we not only heard Him . . . not only have we seen Him with our eyes . . . notice, *we touched Him with our hands* . . .

Are you sure you weren't seeing things, John?

Oh no . . . we touched him.

In fact, to add emphasis to this particular evidence, John changes the verb tense to speak of one particular event in history.<sup>x</sup>

Clearly, it was in that a room where the disciples had locked themselves for fear of the Jewish leaders. Jesus suddenly passed through that locked door and said, "Peace be with you."

The resurrected Lord stands in their midst and His first words were, "Peace to you!"

If I were the Lord I would have said, "What are you all doing in here hiding?"

I would have asked, "And why did you all abandon me?"

Instead, Jesus declared, "Peace be with you." In other words, "all is forgiven and forgotten."

How could that be? The very next statement in John 20:20 provides the foundation for this incredible forgiveness and grace – Jesus showed them his hands and his side.

They would have touched His scars . . . the verb John uses in 1 John is the verb "to handle" . . . to run

their hands and fingers over the marks He chose to retain as eternal reminders of His atonement.

Jesus will be the only person in heaven with any scars.

And John says, “I not only saw Him and heard Him, but in that moment, I handled His hands . . . for myself.”

John answers the Docetists and the Gnostics in one fell swoop . . . Jesus wasn’t a ghost or a vision or a vapor or a disembodied spirit or a phantom.

He’s real. God has a body; a glorified, tangible, resurrected, eternal body.

Jesus isn’t an abstraction from God; He is the revelation of God – in the flesh.

John – the eyewitness – tells us . . . just who is Jesus?

John ends verse 1 by writing, “Oh, He is **the word of Life!**”

Literally, the *logos of life!*

To the Greek world, the word *logos* or word, referred to a sense of meaning, reason and purpose.<sup>xi</sup>

John says, “God the Son is the *logos* of life – He is the meaning of life . . . the purpose . . . the explanation of life.”

Discard Him . . . ignore Him . . . reject Him and you reject the meaning and the purpose and the explanation of life!

Carl Sagan, one of the most prolific and articulate evolutionists –but a man who died and discovered the truth of his Creator too late, was interviewed by Ted Koppel on nightline after he knew he was dying. Koppel asked him, “Dr. Sagan, do you have any pearls of wisdom that you would like to give to the human race?” Sagan responded, “We live on a hunk of rock and metal that circles a humdrum star that is one of 400 billion other stars that make up the Milky Way Galaxy. . . this is worth pondering.”

That’s not exactly what I’d call a pearl of wisdom.

Clarence Darrow, the attorney that successfully defended the teaching of evolution in public schools made this tragic summary of the human existence when he said that human life is like a ship that is “tossed by every wave and by every wind; a ship headed to no port and no harbor, with no rudder, no compass, no pilot, simply floating for a time, then lost in the waves.”<sup>xii</sup>

Stephen Hawking wrote, “If we find an answer to (why we and the universe exist), it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason . . .”<sup>xiii</sup>

Carl Sagan “Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Hello?!

The Word of Life has come . . . the answer from God has come. And **He came to seek and to save those who were lost! (Luke 19:10)**

## 2. Two claims from an eyewitness account

Now John provides in *verse 2*, two claims about the Word of Life.

Notice, first, John writes that [*Jesus*] – **the life was manifested to us.**

You could render it, the life appeared!<sup>xv</sup>

In other words, His life became visible and tangible. This wasn’t the appearance of an abstract principle, but a real person.<sup>xvi</sup>

He appeared in human history.

By the way, this is the same word used for Christ’s second coming where John writes later on in **chapter 2** of Christ’s second appearing.

Jesus Christ intersected human history in His first coming and He will yet again intersect human history in His second coming.

And that will be literal too . . . physical, tangible and real. We’ll all be able to touch Him and embrace Him and fall before His literal feet . . . because God has a body.

So the first claim in verse 2 is that God became flesh when He made His first appearance;

Secondly, another staggering statement – Jesus Christ is equally God along with God the Father.

Notice further in *verse 2*. **He [speaking of Jesus, the word of life] is the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us.**

Which was with the Father.

Which was . . . this verb refers to the past continuous existence of the word of life.

Which was with the Father – the preposition “with” depicts a “face-to-face” relationship existing in the eternal mystery of the Godhead.

In other words, Jesus Christ, the pre-incarnate Son of God, existed in eternity past in close communion with God the Father.<sup>xvii</sup>

Which is why Jesus could claim to have existed long before He took on flesh – which is why He could say, “I Am!”

Which is why John can get all excited in verse 2 and tell us that he’s actually testifying and

proclaiming Jesus Christ as not only the word of Life, but eternal life.

What do you do when you hear good news? You probably pick up the phone . . . or go on Facebook . . . or tweet somebody . . . or text them or email them. Or go to a friend's cubicle or office or stop by their home and tell them all the details.

You just can't keep good news to yourself.

John said, "I'm all about testifying and proclaiming" this news.

The word for *testifying* here in *verse 3* is the word for being a witness; the word for *proclaiming* refers to a sense of commissioning.<sup>xviii</sup>

When you find these two words together it emphasizes that the testimony is resting on an eyewitness account.<sup>xix</sup>

This is what I heard . . . this is what I handled . . . this is what I saw.

The claims are true – He is a living man and He is eternal God.

Now what difference does any of this make?

Are there any life-changing, mind-altering, spirit renovating results from this eyewitness account?

### **3. Three results from this eyewitness account**

John would say, "Absolutely . . . in fact there are three of them."

Three words:

#### **Number 1 – relationship!**

Notice *verse 3* again – *what we have seen and heard, we proclaim to you also, so that – here it is, so that you too may have fellowship with us.*

The word "fellowship" is from *koinonia* (κοινωνία) which refers to a close bond or partnership.

It's a kindred spirit and a kindred heart and kindred mind.

Not because we share the same language – or that we share the same nationality – or race or that we share the same standard of living or the same educational past . . . we have *koinonia* because we share the same life in Jesus Christ.

This is why you can meet a woman or a man, a young person and no nothing about them except that they belong to Jesus Christ and there is immediate kinship. Immediate fellowship.

I've experienced this sitting in a hut in Africa – nobody warned me . . . I would be preaching that

night to all those gathered inside that hut, with one lantern in the middle of the room; so dark I couldn't see my notes or even my Bible. I had to quote everything . . . I was making stuff up.

I've experienced *koinonia* in India with believers I never understood and everything I said was translated into who knows what; and with a hearing impaired assembly in Japan where I worshipped with people who never made any noise, but signed their worship to our living Lord.

With people in South America; I don't know more than a few words in Spanish . . . and as I greeted hundreds of people who came up after each service, I just smiled and said, "Muy bein" over and over again. They'd start talking and I'd smile and say "Muy bein . . ." or sometimes "Amen" – that worked too.

Immediate kinship . . . a close bond because of our partnership in the gospel of this living God-man, Jesus Christ.

You see, because we belong to Him, we actually belong to each other!<sup>xx</sup>

But there's another result here . . . not only is their relationship;

#### **Number 2 – there is reconciliation!**

Notice, *verse 3* again *you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.*

There's horizontal fellowship with each other and there's vertical fellowship with God. Reconciled to God through Christ – no longer at odds with Him, but in fellowship with Him.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18).*

In other words, we now have the same ministry of Christ – we have the ministry of bringing people together with God.

Imagine being used to reconcile someone to God!

Let me illustrate that in the life of someone who was an agent of human reconciliation.

Two Jewish families had been ripped apart because of World War 2. Marcel Sternberger had immigrated to the United States and found work. He always took the 9:09 Long Island train from his home to Woodside, New York where he caught a subway into the city. On January 10, 1948, he boarded the 9:09 as usual. En route, he suddenly decided to visit a Hungarian friend who lived in

Brooklyn and was ill. So he changed to the subway for Brooklyn, went and visited his friend and then boarded a subway heading toward his office downtown Manhattan.

Let me read the account written by Marcel in person. He wrote, I'd been living in New York long enough not to start conversations with strangers. But, being a photographer, I have the habit of analyzing people's faces, and I was struck by the sad features of the passenger near me. He was probably in his late 30's and seemed to be terribly sad. He was reading a Hungarian newspaper, and something prompted me to say in Hungarian, "I hope you don't mind if I glance at your paper?" The young man seemed surprised to hear someone speaking his native tongue, and answered politely, "You may." During the half hour ride to town, we ended up carrying on a conversation. He said his name was Bela Paskin. He had been a law student when the war started and he'd been arrested and immediately put into a German labor battalion and sent to the Ukraine. He hadn't been able to tell his family or even his wife goodbye.

Later during the end of the war, he was captured by the Russians and put to work burying the German dead.

When the war was finally over, he covered hundreds of miles on foot until he reached his home in Debratzin, a large city in eastern Hungary. I myself knew Debratzin quite well and we talked about it for some time.

He told me that upon arriving to the apartment once occupied by his father, mother, brothers and sisters, he found strangers living there. Then he went upstairs to the apartment that he and his wife once had. No one in the building had ever heard of his family. No one knew his wife or the whereabouts of his family.

As he was leaving, full of sadness, a boy ran after him, calling, "Uncle Paskin, Uncle Paskin." The child was the son of some old neighbors of his and he went to the boy's home to talk with the boy's parents. They informed him, "You're entire family was killed; the Nazis took them and your wife to Auschwitz."

Paskin gave up all hope. A few days later, too heartsick to remain any longer in Hungary, he set out again on foot, stealing across border after border, until he managed to immigrate to the United States in October, 1947 – just three months before I met him on the subway.

All the time, Marcel wrote, I was thinking about a young woman whom I'd met recently at the home of friends who had also been from Debratzin. She had been sent to Auschwitz and then transferred to work in a German munitions factory. Her family had been killed in the gas chambers but she was liberated by the Americans and brought American in the first boatload of displaced persons in 1946.

Her story had moved me so much that I had written down her address and phone number, intending to invite her to meet my family and try, to relieve the terrible emptiness in her life.

It seemed impossible that there could be any connection between these two people, but as I neared my station, I fumbled anxiously in my address book. I asked in what AI hoped was a casual voice, "Was your wife's name Marya?"

He turned pale and said, "Yes, why do you ask?"

I said, "Let's get off the train." I took him by the arm at the next station and led him to a phone booth. He stood there like a man in a trance while I dialed her phone number. It seemed like hours before Marya answered. When I heard her voice at last, I told her who I was and asked her to describe her husband. Then I asked her where she'd lived in Debratzin and she told me the address. Asking her to hold the line, I turned to Paskin and said, "Did you and your wife live on such-and-such a street?" "Yes!" Bela exclaimed. He was trembling. I said to him, "Bela, something miraculous is about to happen . . . here, take this telephone and talk to your wife."

He was so overwhelmed he could hardly speak coherently. I took the receiver from his shaking hands and said to his wife, "Stay where you are . . . I am sending your husband to you."

Marya would tell me later that she walked to the mirror like in a dream to see if her hair had turned gray. The next thing she knew was that a taxi had stopped in front of the house and it was my husband coming toward me . . . details I can't remember, but I do know that this was the happiest time I could remember in many, many years. God definitely brought us together that day.

Can you imagine the joy of being used by God to bring people together?

This was John's great passion . . . to bring people together in relationship and people to God in reconciliation.

Is it any wonder that following that John the Apostle would add one more result of being an eyewitness account?

In a word,

### Number 3 – rejuvenation!

Notice *verse 4. These things we write so that our joy may be made complete.*

Some translations read, “*so that your joy may be made complete.*”

Either one works – for their joy was John’s joy and John’s joy was their joy.

The gospel brings joy!

By the way, John uses a perfect passive subjunctive periphrastic construction here . . . I knew that would be exciting to someone out there.

It’s actually quite helpful. I’ve heard pastors preach from this text that our joy should be overflowing constantly . . . growing stronger and stronger with depth and passion and emotion every day. In fact, if you don’t have more joy in Jesus today than you did yesterday, you’re probably not saved.”

But that’s not what John is saying here. The tense and voice tell us that this joy can be experienced “in part” now, but it will be “made complete” in the future.

We taste joy now . . . in relationship . . . in reconciliation . . . in our rejuvenated spirit by means of the gospel.

But it’s just a taste . . . it’s just a sip. And what a wonderful taste, right?

But don’t you long to long for Him more? Don’t you want to enjoy Him more fully . . . more consistently?

Absolutely! However, in our fallen state, our emotions ebb and flow; our spirits soar and then sag; our feelings rise and fall.

Oh, but what a taste we often experience of the joy of our salvation . . . the joy of the Lord. And we want more of it!

We will have it, in full, one day!

What we experience in part will one day be perfected and completed and consistent and never ending. In that future eternal glory, when we are glorified and perfected in holiness and in the presence of our eternal Lord in heaven – that earthly sip of joy will turn into Niagara Falls; the incomplete taste of joy will turn into a never ending banquet of completed, perfected joy.

In the meantime, if you want to know what joy tastes like – now – you taste it whenever you enjoy the fellowship of one another; you sip on joy when you walk in fellowship with the Father and His Son, Who is our life and our living, eternal Lord.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/13/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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