

Looking ahead

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[0 : 00] 1 John chapter 1. That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life, the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father, and was made manifest to us.

That which we have seen and heard, we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us, and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

And we are writing these things, so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him, and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie, and do not practice the truth.

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

[1 : 35] If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. Heavenly Father, thank you that your word became flesh and dwelt with us.

Thank you that your word is the word of life, and it is alive today, so that we may grow closer to you.

So speak to us now, and help us listen and believe in your Son, Jesus Christ, for his sake. Amen.

Ah, Christmas. It felt like the whole month was building up to the 25th of December, wasn't it? Some of us may be a little sad to see it pass, and some of us may be glad that it's all over.

And those of us who might be more enterprising might already have picked up a few things at the Boxing Day sales this week for next Christmas. Already looking forward to the next Christmas.

[2 : 59] And as 2019 draws to a close, and a new decade arrives, what are we looking forward to? And maybe we're looking forward to a bit of detoxing after all the food.

Or perhaps we're wanting to binge and watch our favorite shows on Netflix. Or perhaps we started planning our next holiday. Or maybe just after a bit of peace and quiet.

Or perhaps we had a rough year. And we're hoping for brighter things ahead. Well, whatever we're looking ahead to, chances are we're looking forward to something that will bring hope, peace, and joy.

After all, deep down, that's what all of us are longing for. But what is the one thing that will bring true hope, peace, and joy? Well, if you came to a Christmas service at Grace Church, chances are you would have heard that the Christmas message is more than just about spreading cheer or goodwill, or spending time with family or an excuse for parties in excess.

Christmas is about celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. And what he came to do for all people across the world. It's encapsulated so well in perhaps the most famous of Bible verses in the Gospel of John, chapter 3.

[4 : 19] For God so loved the world, he gave his Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life. It's about the wonder of the incarnation of God himself.

The grace of the infinite God to be born into a finite, fragile human body. And because we can't save ourselves, God sent his Son to die for our sins, so that we might be forgiven, and enjoy the privilege of spending eternity in the world where there is no more pain or suffering, but only love, peace, and joy.

And that's why we celebrate Christmas. And wonderfully, that's the eternal reality that believers all over the world may look forward to one day. But what about now?

Right now, it may not feel like our sins are conquered. It may not feel like that we are really redeemed. And sharing the good news of Jesus with our family seems to sometimes build friction rather than joy.

And living for Jesus seems so prudish, so socially awkward in the culture amongst our friends and colleagues. And when it's an uphill battle all the time, it's easy to think perhaps we got it wrong, if all this Jesus stuff is really true.

[5 : 42] Perhaps we hear others tell us that there is something more credible tempting us away from our Christian faith. When the going is rough, it's hard not to feel discouraged, small, and alone.

And so it's with this in mind that the main purpose of the first letter of the Apostle John is an encouragement for believers to keep going faithfully.

And it's for believers to know that we're never alone, even when it all seems too much. But that we may enjoy the forever presence with God now.

And just like John's Gospel, the purpose statement of this letter can be found near the end. Do keep a finger at where you are, but just flip a couple of pages over to chapter 5.

It's on page 1230. Verse 13. I'll read from verse 13. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

[6 : 49] That you have eternal life. The Apostle John writes to assure these Christians that not only will they one day enjoy eternal life with God, but the privilege and joy of being brought into fellowship with Him is available to us now.

Therefore, if you're a believer today, that ought to be great cause for joy. Because eternal life isn't something we look forward to, or isn't just something we look forward to, but in the meantime it's all doom and gloom.

The future reality we look forward to, to be in fellowship with the good and holy God, to never be alone, and to experience true peace and joy. Well, that fellowship is also a present reality.

And we can enjoy that fellowship now. So how does this work? How are we brought into fellowship with God? Well, my first point, it's by listening to the Apostle's testimony of Jesus.

Listening to the Apostle's testimony of Jesus. I'll flip back to 1 John chapter 1 again, and look with me at verse 1.

[8 : 03] That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.

The life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testified to it, and proclaimed to you the eternal life, which was with the Father, and was made manifest to us.

Now, the Apostle John was probably an old man when he wrote this letter. And when he says we and us, he's referring to those who were with him, as in the first disciples of Jesus, or the apostles, if you like.

The apostles were the ones to have seen Jesus with their own eyes. They heard Jesus with their own ears, and touched Jesus with their own hands. The beginning of John's gospel echoes a similar theme.

You don't have to flip to it, but it says, as we're familiar in Christmas, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

[9 : 06] But here, in his first letter, John goes one further. Now, the extraordinary claim is that his Word, who was in the beginning, the God incarnate, the apostles, actually lived with him.

That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and have touched with our hands. The apostles heard him speak and spoke to him themselves.

They were taught by him. Jesus, the best teacher who ever lived. And no doubt they laughed and cried with him. They would have ate with him and walked with him and saw him perform miracles. And with their own eyes, they saw him crucified.

After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to them and said, Put your finger here and see my hands and put out your hand and place it on my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.

They felt the marks where the nails were hammered through his hands. They felt the marks where the spear had pierced his side. Heard Jesus. Saw Jesus.

[10 : 15] Felt Jesus. The apostles were the eyewitness, the ear witness, and the hand witnesses of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Therefore, we can be sure that Jesus was not just a made-up character or an amped-up version of history. Jesus was flesh and blood, just like you and I are flesh and blood.

And although he was fully man, he was also fully God. Now see the very heart of John's message, that Jesus is the gift of eternal life.

Look at verse 2. The life was made manifest, and we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.

He is the beginning. Jesus is the word of life. And he is the eternal life. And because the apostles were convinced that Jesus is exactly who he says he is, they couldn't help but proclaim it to the world, even if it meant suffering and dying for it.

[11 : 25] Therefore, we need to listen and believe the apostles' testimony of Jesus. And as we do, we enter into fellowship with him. Which is my second point.

Listen to the apostles' testimony of Jesus, to enter into fellowship with them. Let us continue in verse 3. That which we have seen and heard, we proclaim to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us.

And indeed, our fellowship is with the Father and with the Son, Jesus Christ. I wonder if you've noticed a surprise here. We might expect John to say, you too may have fellowship with God, or with Jesus, or at least with the Holy Spirit.

But he didn't. John said, so that you too may have fellowship with us. Now what's going on here? Did John let his fame get to his head?

Or was it because he was old and losing a bit of perspective? Well, if I was writing this, I'm not sure I'd have the audacity to put it quite like that. But you see, on one hand, John is just a man, just like you and me.

[12 : 41] But on the other hand, he's not like you and me. He and the other apostles were the first person, eye, ear, and hand witnesses of Jesus. The apostles were given special authority.

Now, after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to them, and he said in John chapter 20, As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.

And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld. Now, nobody alive now has that same authority. Not the Pope, not ordained ministers, not any of us. No one can forgive sins. Only God can forgive sins.

Now, the apostles were just ordinary people, but they were given special authority. No one before and since had that special privilege. Therefore, John wasn't puffing himself at all.

[13 : 49] I suppose the implication here is that the apostles' testimony of Jesus is the authentic testimony of Jesus.

And that's why we need to listen and believe what they say in the Bible. The apostles are the guardians of the truth. And although we can't forgive sins, we can enjoy fellowship with God. And the way to do that is by receiving that truth. Therefore, it would be disastrous to trust in any teaching which strays from the apostles' version of Jesus.

And that now, just as false teachers were around the first century church, a false teaching is around us today. Whether it's treating Jesus only as a moral teacher, or treating the Bible only as a big list of do's and don'ts.

Or reducing Jesus into such a way would be to miss out on the wonderful grace of God. And if we apply heavenly riches to the present, believing that Jesus' way of showing blessing to us today is only through prosperity in this life, then we'll miss out on the true reward for us in heaven.

[14 : 58] And if we treat Jesus as a life insurance policy, thinking that we might be saved just in case we die, while not changing how we conduct our lives, then effectively we're still rejecting God.

And we'll miss out on the true joy of fellowshiping with them. You see, the problem is that all these false teaching deny the apostles' testimony of Jesus.

They all deny the incarnation and the resurrection. Now, like an iPhone knockoff, these pretenders are, at best, a poor imitation of the real thing.

They're unsatisfying and disappointing. And ultimately, just a fake. Not the real deal. They cannot save and cannot bring us to fellowship with God.

We must submit to God's word. And it starts by listening and believing the apostles' testimony of Jesus. And as we do, we enter fellowship with them.

[16 : 00] And just like the apostles, we enjoy that privileged relationship with God himself. Which brings me to my third and final point. To enjoy fellowship with God.

Now, we saw a couple of weeks ago, didn't we? That one day, the new creation will usher in a new Eden. Eden 2.0, if you like. Where believers will enjoy healing and perfect union with God.

Where he will wipe away every tear from the people's eyes. Death shall be no more. Neither there shall be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore. It's a glimpse of the ultimate fellowship with God. It's an all-encompassing sharing of life. The perfect union with the Almighty. An intimate oneness with the God who created everything.

It's akin to a true marriage relationship. A most intimate bond. An unbreakable union. It's what Christians look forward to with God in his new kingdom.

[17 : 01] And incredibly, while we wait, believers can enjoy a taste of that now. Look again with me at verse 3. That which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you.

So that you too may have fellowship with us. And indeed, our fellowship is with the Father and with the Son, Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Now just as the apostles enjoyed an intimate fellowship with God, in and after this life, we too may enjoy that same intimate fellowship with him. Even as the apostles were locked up in prison.

Even as they were persecuted, mocked, stoned. And even as they were put to death, the love of God and their fellowship with him never separated. Their fellowship with God was just as real 2,000 years ago as it is today.

Now wonderfully, that means Christians are never alone. And as we listen and believe the apostles' testimony of Jesus, as we enter fellowship with the apostles, we enjoy that same inseparable fellowship with God himself.

[18 : 20] Therefore, what characterizes a Christian fellowship is not just a meeting of like-minded people in shared interest or purpose or rank. What's special about a Christian fellowship is that we're brought into our new family with God.

A family of people from all nations where the center is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Not a family of strife and arguments or selfishness, but one that only consists of love and bring true peace and joy and hope.

And although in this world, that might not be our experience now, but the promise here is that those who believe can enjoy God's embrace. It's the same embrace and joy by the psalmist in our first reading in Psalm 36.

Flip back to me if you like. Page 558. Now for the psalmist, it's clear that life is not as it should be, but even as evil surrounds him, listen to his joy as he sings about God's goodness.

Look with me at verse 7. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

[19 : 44] They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life, and in your light do we see light.

O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your righteousness to the upright of heart. It's what the psalmist knew. It's what the apostles knew.

Jesus Christ is that fountain of life, that river of our delights. The Christian fellowship is first and foremost a relationship with Christ, and then to all believers.

So when we find it hard to keep going in our Christian walk, as we feel discouraged, or small, or alone, God is with us.

He is with us in the fight. We can look forward to the new creation, the world as it's supposed to be, and be in perfect union with God. And right now, as we listen and believe the apostles' testimony of Jesus, as we enter into fellowship with him, we can enjoy that same wonderful fellowship the apostles enjoyed with God.

[21 : 05] And practically, what does that mean for us? Well, it means that we've got 24-7 access to God the Father. We can pray to him anytime we like, where he's always available.

It means that we can pour our hearts and our soul out to God, knowing that his shoulder is broad, and he hears our cries. It means that we can hear his voice, and we can read the pages of the Bible.

It means that as we meet with other Christians, encouraging one another, and praying and singing hymns together, we fellowship with Jesus, just as the apostles were in fellowship with Jesus.

And as we seek his forgiveness for stumbling in our Christian walk, it means that we can be sure that he won't turn his back on us, and he will forgive us our sins.

And it means that when we're rejected for what we believe by others, God embraces us all the more. Now, the joy of apostles is brought by believers joining God's new family, entering into fellowship.

[22 : 13] So as we share the gospel with others and long for others to believe, it means we also partake in the same joy of the apostles. And as new believers join God's new family, we can share in the joy that brings, praising God for his steadfast love.

And if you're sitting here and you don't yet enjoy that sort of relationship with God, but would like to, then may I say, that is a great place to be.

And why not speak to a neighbor beside you? Why not speak to Bruce or myself, or someone who brought you along? And why not take one of these books that we've got, it's called The Gift, and it talks about that true hope, peace, and joy that you may have.

Even today. Only fellowship with God can bring lasting hope, peace, and joy. To listen and to believe in the apostles' testimony is to enter fellowship with them and with God.

And in the new creation, we can enjoy perfect union with Jesus, the life giver himself. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, thank you.

[23 : 32] Thank you so much for the authentic testimony of Jesus through the apostles. Thank you for giving us a new family and the promise of eternal life.

And so as we go about our daily lives, please help us to really listen to you and to help us believe so that we might enjoy eternal fellowship with you now and forever.

In your son's life-giving name, we pray. Amen.