

"Word of Life"

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church, and happy Father's Day. Would you turn with me to the book of 1 John? As Pastor Matt mentioned, we're going to be beginning a new sermon series this morning in the New Testament book of 1 John.

That's page 959 in the Pew Bible, if you'd like to turn there. 959. I wonder if you've ever had any doubts about Christianity.

Perhaps you've wondered whether Christianity is true and whether you should believe it. Or maybe at a deeper level, I wonder if you've ever had any doubts, not necessarily about Christianity, but about yourself, whether you're really a Christian.

Whether you really have eternal life. Whether what you believe is the real thing, the genuine article. Well, the book of 1 John is written to Christians who are being blown and tossed by doubts just like these.

They, too, were wondering whether or not they had the real thing, and they were deeply troubled and deeply confused. And as we work our way through this book over the course of the summer, we'll start to learn why.

[1 : 1 8] You know, it seems that a group of people who had broken away from the church then began to teach and practice things that caused those original believers to lose their confidence. Because this breakaway group said that they had discovered the true meaning of fellowship with God and the real secret to spiritual life.

They were saying that what these Christians believe wasn't the real thing after all. And that caused them great trouble, great concern.

So John writes his letter to combat these false teachings and to give his readers confidence. At the end of the book, John states his purpose very clearly. He says in chapter 5, verse 13, he says, 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 so that you can know.

So John is writing to build up Christians in their assurance. Assurance that they do indeed have eternal life. Assurance that the message that they received is indeed the truth.

Assurance that Jesus Christ really is the Son of God come in the flesh. So I wonder, friend, do you wish you had a bit more assurance today? A bit more confidence that your relationship with God in Christ really is the real thing?

[2 : 4 2] That's what John wants to impart to us. He wants us to know how to recognize genuine faith. And he wants us to have it for ourselves. So let's dive in and let's see how John begins his letter.

1 John chapter 1. We're going to look at verses 1 through 4 this morning, which is the intro to this letter of 1 John. John writes, 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.

Let's pray together. Father, as we spend the next couple of moments this morning meditating on this beautifully rich passage, and as we set out this summer to meditate and consider this beautiful book of 1 John, would you come in your grace and in your mercy by your spirit and give us understanding of these things?

God, not just an intellectual understanding, but the deep heart assurance that John wants his readers to have, that you want us to have in our Lord Jesus Christ. So help us, we pray.

[4 : 21] In Jesus' name, amen. Okay, so as John opens his letter, you might have noticed that the sentence here, the structure is pretty complex, right? I mean, usually a sentence sort of goes like this.

There's a subject followed by a verb followed by an object, right? As in, I play baseball. Yeah, right? That's like how sentences are supposed to work.

But John, in this opening sentence, rather than putting the subject and the verb first, he puts the object first, right? In order to find the subject and the verb, you have to go all the way down to verse 3.

And there we discover that the subject and the verb of this long opening sentence is, we proclaim. We proclaim.

So that's what this introduction is all about. In verses 1 and 2, John tells us what he proclaims. His proclamation is what? Concerning the word of life.

[5 : 21] And then in verses 3 and 4, he tells us why he proclaims it. So that his readers might not only have fellowship with him, with the church, but also with God, with God the Father, with his son, Jesus Christ.

But remember, this letter is meant to bring assurance, right? So even in these opening verses, John is trying to impart confidence in his Christian readers.

These readers are troubled that what they've heard and what they believe might not be the genuine thing. It might not be the key to knowing God after all. So we should ask, how do these opening verses impart that confidence that what John has to say about the word of life really is genuine and true?

In other words, why should we believe this message concerning the word of life, as he puts it at the end of verse 1? Well, there are kind of three steps in the argument that I'm going to try to trace out this morning.

Or at least three ways in which this opening introduction serves to fuel our assurance and our confidence. Notice first that this word of life, John says in verse 2, was made manifest.

[6 : 31] Other English versions will translate that same word as the word of life appeared or even revealed. So the first thing that John's pointing out here is that we can be confident in this word of life because this word of life showed up, made itself known, was openly revealed and made manifest.

Now what exactly does that mean? Well, this takes us right into the very first verse where John explores this. We proclaim, John says, that which was from the beginning.

And immediately when we hear that phrase, don't we think of the opening verse of the whole Bible, Genesis 1-1, in the beginning God. Or maybe we think about the beginning also of John's gospel, John 1-1, in the beginning was the word.

John's pulling that same thread here. And he's saying that this message concerning the word of life is about the eternal God who existed from the beginning, from the timeless beginning of eternity, before anything was created or made, that which was from the beginning.

In verse 2, John will describe it further, this word of life further, as the eternal life which was with the Father. And doesn't that remind us of the opening of John's gospel, where we read that the word was with God and the word was God.

[7 : 51] But then in the rest of verse 1, things get kind of interesting, don't they? You know, most religions will talk about some kind of transcendent, supernatural, maybe even timeless God or spiritual force.

But things get interesting in verse 1. John says, We proclaim that which was from the beginning, which we have heard. Okay, maybe that's not so weird.

We hear things about this spirituality. But then says, John says, which we have seen with our eyes. And then he says, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands.

When John says, the life was made manifest, this is what he means. He means that the eternal God entered history.

And that John and the other apostles saw him, heard him, even touched him. How could this be, you ask? How could what is eternal enter into time?

[8 : 53] How could the infinite be seen and touched? Well, what John is describing here is the fact of the incarnation.

That God the Son took on human flesh and lived among us. Fully human and fully God. Two natures in one person. God can be known because he has made himself known in the person of Jesus.

Jesus living in the flesh right before us. Notice that John is saying two things about Jesus here. First, that Jesus really is one with the Father.

He is fully God. As we've said, John is saying this is the one who was from the beginning, sharing God's eternity. He is the word of life. The eternal life. Which was with the Father. But here is the mystery and the wonder.

John is also saying that Jesus is fully human. We've heard him and seen him and even touched him. Perhaps John had in mind that moment after Jesus' resurrection that we read earlier.

[10 : 03] When Jesus came into their midst and ate with them and said, go ahead. Touch me. It's really me. Or maybe John had in mind one of the countless other times when he and the apostles would have been traveling together with Jesus.

Eating together. Passing food back and forth. Rowing boats together. Setting up tents together. John had no doubt that Jesus really was a fully human person.

And here is the beauty and the wonder of a genuine Christian message. God took on flesh and dwelt among us.

That's one way you can tell and perhaps the most important way you can tell genuine Christianity from false substitutes. How do you tell genuine Christianity from false substitutes?

The main test, not the only, but the main test is, do you believe in the full humanity and the full deity of Jesus Christ? If you leave either one of those behind, you don't have the real thing.

[11 : 19] But if it's true that God became flesh for us, then don't you see the assurance that this brings to our hearts? Consider first what this central fact of Christianity means.

First, it means that God has made himself known. God hasn't remained a secret, hidden in eternity. The one true God doesn't need to be sort of sought after in mystical experiences that only sort of the select, dedicated few could ever hope to achieve.

God doesn't need to be sort of reasoned to through intellectual feats that only the smartest and most talented of philosophers could possibly achieve.

No, God made himself plainly known for all to see in the person of Jesus Christ. But the incarnation doesn't just mean that God has revealed himself to humans.

It means that humans can be reconciled to God. You see, friends, the problem that exists between God and you and me isn't just a sort of gap of knowledge, right?

[12 : 35] The problem isn't just that we need to get more information about God, as if our main problem were ignorance or confusion. The problem that exists between God and you and me isn't just a knowledge gap.

It's a moral gap. Because we humans are rebels who have turned away from God to try to run life our own way in this world that God has made.

And having rebelled against God, turned away from God, we've incurred God's just wrath against our rebellion. But if the incarnation is true, then God hasn't just overcome the knowledge gap, he's overcome that moral gap as well.

Because in Jesus, in Jesus' humanity, he lives a perfect life of obedience to the Father, an obedience that he offers up on our behalf.

So that even though our human moral record is tainted, we can have his human moral record that is perfect and complete as our own. A righteousness given to us.

[13 : 50] And in his humanity, Jesus also dies to pay the penalty that our sins deserve. God's just sentence against human sin falls on Jesus, who in his humanity can rightfully represent us and rightfully pay it.

But because he is also fully God, this payment is infinite, perfect, and complete. And that brings the deepest assurance imaginable.

That God himself has made the way. We don't look to someone less than God for our rescue. We look to Jesus, God himself, who has made the way.

So when you look to Jesus Christ, you see not just God fully revealed to humanity, but you see sinners fully reconciled to God. And that reconciliation is offered freely to all who would admit their sin and trust in him.

So the word of life then is revealed, John says. It's manifest. It's incarnated right in our midst. And that is our greatest assurance.

[15 : 06] But this kind of leads to another question, doesn't it? How does this message of who Jesus is and what he has done get to us? We weren't there, right, to hear and see and touch for ourselves.

So what assurance can we have of these things? Well, this brings us to the second thing that John has to say. This is kind of his second big point about this message concerning the word of life.

First, was the manifestation of the incarnate Jesus. But second, is the proclamation through the eyewitnesses of the apostles. The proclamation.

Look again at verse 2. John says, You see, the event of the incarnation did not go unnoticed.

In fact, Jesus himself selected the apostles to be eyewitnesses of all that he said and did in his public ministry. Most importantly, the apostles became eyewitnesses of his greatest work of all, his death and his resurrection.

[16 : 22] Now, John uses two words here to describe his apostolic announcement. The first one is testify, and the second one is proclaim. The first word testify points to the fact that John and the other apostles were eyewitnesses of all that Jesus said and did.

And in that way, the apostles had the authority of experience. They were there. They saw it for themselves. So they could authoritatively say out of their own experience, this is what's true about Jesus.

They could give reliable witness to Jesus because they had indeed witnessed him for themselves. But the second word is proclaim. And the word proclaim actually carries the sense of being commissioned for a task.

In other words, the apostles didn't just see these things for themselves. In addition to that, Jesus himself commissioned them to speak and to teach on his behalf. You see this throughout the gospels, actually.

When Jesus is calling the apostles, why does he call them? So that they might be with him and so that they might go out and preach, right? And then he'll say things like, whoever listens to you listens to me.

[17 : 33] And whoever listens to me listens to the one who sent me. So in other words, the apostles didn't just see these things for themselves. In addition to that, Jesus commissioned them to speak and teach on his behalf.

And, you know, we saw another example of this in Luke 24. The risen Jesus commissions the apostles to go forth and proclaim what they had heard from him with his authority. Now, how does this connect to assurance?

Well, for John's first readers, they needed to be reminded that the message they received came from the ones who had not just seen Jesus with their own eyes, but who had also been commissioned by Jesus to share that message with others.

The splinter group that had kind of broken away and was troubling John's original audience, they were teaching things and practicing things that had no basis in what the apostles taught.

And we don't know for sure what they were appealing to for the basis of those things they were teaching and practicing. Maybe they were appealing to spiritual experience. Maybe they were appealing to cultural trends.

[18 : 39] Maybe they were appealing to who knows what. But it had no basis in what the apostles taught. And so John's original readers were not to be blown and tossed by it.

The message that mattered was the message of the apostles. And the same, friends, is true today. If we want to know the truth about Jesus and about what it means to follow him, where should we look and where only should we look?

Well, we should look and only look to the testimony and proclamation of the apostles themselves. After all, they actually heard him, saw him, touched him, and they received the commission from him to be his witnesses and to teach in his name.

You know, it's not uncommon today to hear someone say, you know, if they disagree with something in the New Testament or especially Paul. Paul tends to sort of get the worst of it, you know.

Someone disagrees with something Paul says. You know, that's just what Paul says. That's just what Paul says. We can think something else. You can almost imagine the original readers of John's letter probably hearing something similar from the group that was troubling them.

[19 : 53] Look, that's just what John says. We know what's true. But friends, consider how strange it would be if you were in a courtroom and one of the attorneys stood up and said, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you should not find my client guilty of these charges.

After all, these folks you've been listening to all this time, bringing forth all this evidence, well, look, they were only the eyewitnesses. They don't really know what happened. The jury would scratch their head and say, wait, we're not supposed to trust the eyewitnesses who saw all this stuff?

None of that would fly. We would laugh that attorney right out of court. And in the same way, when we base what we believe about Jesus and what we believe it means to follow Jesus faithfully on what the apostles teach, we're basing it on the only reasonable and sure foundation.

To trade the apostolic word for some other word is like trusting a clever lawyer trying to win a case rather than trusting the people who saw it with their own eyes.

But notice also here, not just John's apostolic qualifications, notice too his motivations.

[21 : 10] In verse 3 he says, 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.

John wanted his readers to know the fellowship that comes from believing in this word of life. And it's a two-fold fellowship, isn't it?

On the one hand, it's a fellowship with us. That is with the church. With the church that the apostles had founded. And on the other hand, it's a fellowship with God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son. You know, John isn't ultimately trying to build his own brand or grow his own following.

Right? In fact, there's a strong likelihood that John might be writing this letter in exile. Writing this letter towards the end of his life when many of the apostles had died for their witness to Christ.

John's motivation was that his readers would be united to God and to the people of God. United to Christ and to Christ's church. And you know, friends, the two must always go together.

[22 : 18] The two must always go together. The gospel, first and foremost, reconciles us to God. Whereas once we were God's enemies because of sin, now through the grace of Christ we're God's children, united in intimate fellowship with him.

But out of this common fellowship with God in Christ that we have, the church is born. A people who are united as a spiritual family. Not united around race or class or nationality or musical preferences or educational background or similar hobbies.

No, the church is united in a common love and common devotion and common union with Christ. We have fellowship with God and with one another because of Christ.

And the two must always go together. You know, we can't be content with an evangelism or a spirituality that doesn't lead to a robust engagement with church life.

That would be a deficient kind of spirituality. And we can't be content with a church life whose unity is some superficial social or political commonality.

[23 : 28] That would be a deficient church life. No, true evangelism and spirituality draws people to God and to God's people. Just as a true church will not simply draw people into a social club, but into living fellowship with a living and holy God.

But as we think about having assurance in this apostolic message, we still might ask one more question. After all, the apostles aren't around anymore, are they? Not only are we not eyewitnesses of Jesus, we're not around to hear the apostles teach.

Those eyewitnesses have all died long ago. They aren't here to share their testimony. So how can we possibly have any assurance in what they taught? Well, the answer to this last question is answered somewhat indirectly by the last verse in our passage.

In verse 4, John writes, And we're writing these things so that our joy may be complete. We're writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Now notice again, John's pastoral heart coming through here. He's saying that his joy would not be complete until his readers come to really know that they have eternal life in Christ.

[24 : 45] That's where his real joy lies in seeing them enjoy the assurance of union and fellowship with God in Christ. But notice here, and here's the point I want to point out, notice how John is going about this work.

He says, I'm writing these things so that our joy may be complete. For John, his written words are just as important and just as effective as his testifying and proclaiming in person.

In fact, for John, his in-person testifying and proclaiming was limited, right, to wherever his body and his voice could carry. But the written word allowed John to minister to this troubled church even though it was many miles away.

It was the written word that would allow John's joy to be complete because the written word could finish what his in-person ministry had only started. And we know that this is true not just for John's ministry to this particular church, the recipients of the letter we call 1 John.

It would be the written word that would complete the ministry of all the apostles. They were given their commission by Jesus to teach in his name and lay the foundation of the church.

[26 : 05] And that church would stretch to the ends of the earth and to the end of the age. And if that were true, how else would the testimony and teaching of these finite men do that global work that Jesus intended unless it was written down and preserved?

And friends, that's exactly what we see and exactly what we have in what we call the New Testament. Here is the written record of the apostles' testimony and proclamation, written by them, authorized by the risen Jesus himself, and inspired by the Holy Spirit, as Jesus promised.

And so you see that the incarnate word of verse 1 becomes the proclaimed word of verses 2 and 3, which in turn then becomes the written word of verse 4.

So as we read that written word today, we still encounter the proclaimed word of the apostles. And through the proclaimed word of the apostles, we encounter the incarnate word, Jesus Christ.

Or rather, we should better say, the incarnate word encounters us. The living Lord Jesus continues to speak through his commissioned apostles as we read the words the Holy Spirit inspired them to preach and to write.

[27 : 34] And as the living Lord encounters us through his word, he gives us rich assurance. Assurance that we have fellowship with God. Assurance that we are indeed part of his church.

And this assurance flows forth into joy. When John says, I'm writing these things so that our joy may be complete, I think he intends not just his own joy, but the joy of his readers as well.

Our joy. And what greater joy could there be than that found in this message of the incarnate Jesus.

The joy of knowing that God has made himself known. The joy of knowing that God has forgiven all our sins and reconciled us to himself. The joy of knowing that our fellowship with God will not be broken because Jesus has united us to himself.

The joy of knowing that we don't need to do this life alone because we're joined together in the fellowship and the family of the church to run this race together, to bear one another's burdens, to rejoice with those who rejoice, to grieve with those who grieve, to spur one another on to love and good deeds, and to continue doing so until the day comes when we all see the incarnate Jesus face to face.

[28 : 57] When sin and sorrow are no more and we step into the new heavens and new earth because Christ has returned to take his people to himself and to make all things new. And friends, on that day, then our assurance will be complete and then our fellowship will be complete and our joy will at last be truly and finally complete.

Because you know, on that day, we'll be able to say with the apostles and with all the church that that which we have heard, we too have seen with our eyes and have looked upon and touched with our hands.

Friends, this will be true of all of us one day. We will gaze upon and behold and embrace the very word of life. Let's persevere to that day.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we ask that by your spirit you would give us a renewed confidence in the apostolic word that you've given us.

And we pray that by your spirit we would continue, as we engage with your word, to be encountering Christ himself. Lord, let these words not just be dry words on a page or dry, simple words in the mouth, but would you cause them to light a fire within our souls once again that burns for you, for the knowledge of you, and for the glory of you.

[30 : 25] God, as we work our way through this book this summer, would you give us clarity as to what genuine Christianity is? Help us to recognize it and spot it and love it and cherish it.

But Father, we also ask, as we work our way through this book, that our own confidence and assurance that we are known by you would grow. Lord, perhaps there are some here this summer, even today, who aren't sure that they know you, who find these things confusing or obscure.

Lord, we pray that you would continue to open the eyes of their hearts to see the beauty of Christ and the truth of Christ. And we pray that by your spirit you would grant them the faith to embrace him for themselves.

We ask this in the mighty name of Jesus. Amen.