

HEREBY WE KNOW

PART I

Prologue of I John

I John 1:1-7

Life is Fellowship with God Who is Light

Chapter I

GOD IN A TEST TUBE

The Prologue 1:1-4

A. *The Text*

“That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld, and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life (2) (and the life was manifest, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare unto you the life, the eternal *life*, which was manifested unto us): (3) that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you also, that ye also may have fellowship with us; yea and our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ; (4) and these things we write that our joy may be made full.”

B. *Try to Discover*

1. Is there “scientific” proof of the truth of the Christian Gospel?
2. What does the use of the verbs of hearing, seeing, and handling indicate about the author’s relationship to the incarnation?
3. What does John say is his two-fold purpose of writing? (I John 1:3-4)
4. How does John’s claim to sensory experience with the “word of life” answer the *gnostic problem*?
(See Introduction)
5. What other New Testament writing begins with a similar prologue?

6. What do we know about the word (logos) from John's Gospel? (Read John 1:1-14). See also Paul T. Butler, *Gospel of John*, Vol. I, College Press, 1961., pp. 19-ff.)
7. How does this writing become part of the fulfillment of John's Apostolic Commission? (Compare I John 1:2-3 and Acts 1:8)

C. *Paraphrase*

"That which was from the beginning, Which we have heard, Which we have seen with our eyes, Which we ourselves gazed upon, and our hands did handle, Concerning the Word of Life, (2) And the Life was made manifest, and we have seen, and are bearing witness, and announcing unto you, The Age-abiding Life, Which, indeed, was with the Father, and was made manifest unto us. (3) That which we have seen and heard are we announcing even unto you, in order that ye too may have fellowship with us and our own fellowship also may be with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (4) And these things are we writing in order that our joy may be made full."

D. *Comments*

1. Preliminary Remarks

First John is especially relevant in our time. Just as the gnostics of the first century believed they had a corner on knowledge, so the modern who is awed by the phenomenal advance in technical, scientific knowledge often scoffs at the traditional faith of the Christian. Just as did the gnostic, so does the modern agnostic, consider himself and his knowledge of life too sophisticated to accept the fundamental tenets of Bible based belief.

The cry of today's skeptic is, "No one can prove there is a God. There is no scientific proof." The same doubter is often eager to accept anything he sees on his television screen as true so long as it is substantiated by the testimony of "five New York doctors." The inconsistency of these two attitudes never occurs to him.

The demand for scientific evidence is not new. Nearly two thousand years ago when Thomas heard of the resurrection of Jesus, he demanded sound proof. He would not believe until he had thrust his finger into the nail prints, and his hand into the spear scar in the side of the Master.

That which Thomas learned and which the present day skeptic must learn is that *God placed Himself in a test tube* in the incarnation. When the experiment was complete, and the evidence all presented, Thomas voiced the only honest conclusion . . . "My Lord and my God." (John 20) The incarnation presented to man, at a time and a place in history, a scientific demonstration of the fact that God is! The Gospel of John is a "lab report" of this experiment. I John is the practical application of the results to life.

The honest seeker after truth, whether he live in the first century or the twentieth, deserves to be confronted with this scientific demonstration. He needs also to understand that his own relationship to this Incarnate "God-In-A-Test-Tube," is the test by which he may know whether he himself has life or mere existence.

As in the fourth Gospel, the Apostle John begins this epistle also with a prologue. In it he lays the footings of all that will follow. The tests by which we may know we are in fellowship with God and God's people are not of human origin. They are related to the incarnation experience of the eternal word, (logos). That which He revealed about God is that by which we are to examine our own lives. In so doing, we know we are (or are not) really in the divine fellowship.

2. Translation and comments

a. John's appeal to personal, sensory experience with the incarnate Word . . . v.1

(1) "What was from (the) beginning, what we have heard and understood, what we have seen and contemplated with our own eyes, what we looked upon with amazement and our own hands handled, concerning the word of life,"

John begins his letter by presenting *life* as a collective and comprehensive whole. This he does by the use of a neuter pronoun, "*What*." We might have expected him to say "*who*" was from the beginning, "*whom*" we have seen and so on. He is not here calling attention to the Word (logos) as a person but to life which is demonstrated and made available by the Word. It was life which was from the beginning. From a study of John's Gospel we learn that this life is inherent in the person of the Word. (John 1:1-4)

In the original language, the tenses of the verbs in this verse are a kaleidoscope of vivid memory and recurrent recollection. What he has heard so many years ago is still ringing in his ears. He can close his eyes, and the voice of the Galilean still preaches the sermon on the mount.

The very ebb and flow of the Master's voice as He delivered the discourse on the bread of life and a thousand other lessons and sermons is still audible in his retrospection.

What he has seen, he still sees in the eyes of his mind. With but the slightest urging, the panorama of Cana and Gethsemane and Calvary and all the other hallowed scenes stream across his vision in vividness undimmed by time and sharpened by understanding.

What he examined with his hands . . . the breast he leaned upon at the last supper, the touch of those shop-calloused fingers on his shoulders as he walked the shores of Galilee in a communion so close it earned him the title "that disciple whom Jesus loved" . . . the tender touch of the scars in the hands and side that convinced even the most skeptical . . . in these remembrances the tips of his fingers still tingle! Such are the *permanent results* portrayed by the use of the perfect tenses.

The *historic fact* of these experiences is re-emphasized by the aorists "What we looked upon . . . and our hands felt." Here is the crisp, staccato presentation of John's credentials. What he is going to write will not be based upon speculative philosophy but upon personal experience. A fact is a thing done; it cannot be undone. The incarnation is not a matter of opinion, it is a fact of history. The entire tenor of these opening verses is designed to remind his readers that he had personal sensory experience with his subject, and is therefore infinitely more qualified to evaluate it than were the gnostics whose incomplete knowledge was at best second hand, and whose understanding was dependent upon divination rather than demonstration. John is establishing himself as an eyewitness of the incarnation, and no amount of speculation, no matter how sophisticated, can change what he heard and saw and touched.

The word translated "looked upon" (KJV) means "to view with amazement." John appreciates the magnitude of his claim that life actually stood before him in visible, tangible, audible human form. The incarnation, even in this day of space travel and polio vaccine, is still the most astounding fact of human history.

b. Parenthetical statement; the incarnation is a historical fact
 . . . v.2

(2) "(and the life was demonstrated openly, and we have investigated and are testifying and declaring unto you the life, the eternal life. This very life intimately associated with the Father and was openly demonstrated to us.")

Verse two forms a parenthesis. It is not part of the flow of thought contained in the main sentence. This is typical of John's personal writing style. (See John 1:6-8)

The parenthesis here is inserted for the sake of emphasis and clarity. John intends that his readers not miss the implications of verse one. It was *life* which was demonstrated in our time and space; set up in such a way that those who participated in the divine experiment had ample opportunity to investigate and know that truth of which they spoke and wrote.

This life was eternal . . . not created, and it was intimately associated with the Father in eternity before the incarnation. We are at once reminded of this same author's statement in the fourth Gospel, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God." (John 1:1) . . . "And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory . . ." (John 1:14)

Life is no longer an abstract profundity dealing only with the recondite abstruse. That which was obscure has been revealed. Life, therefore, is not to be determined by philosophic speculation. Life is as real and demonstrable as a carpenter who walked and talked and ate and slept and laughed and cried and whose resurrection proved the claim that He made: "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one cometh unto the Father, but by Me." (John 14:6)

In his epistle, John will give us the tests by which we may be as certain of our relationship with the Father as was He, and thereby know we have life.

c. Primary Purpose of John's writing . . . v.3

(3) "What we have seen and heard we are also declaring to you in order that you may share friendly and familiar communion with us. And the friendly, familiar communion which is ours is also with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ."

Following the parenthesis of verse two, John resumes the original train of thought begun in verse one. Without the parenthetical interruption, the thought would run something like this: "What was from the beginning, what we have heard and understood, what we have seen and examined with our own eyes, what we looked upon with amazement and our own hands felt concerning the word of life we are also declaring to you in order that you may keep on having friendly and familiar communion with us. And the friendly familiar communion which is ours is also with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ."

The key word to I John is "fellowship." The Greek word is *koinonia*. I have translated it "friendly familiar communion," in an attempt to represent its true meaning.

The English word "fellowship" is probably adequate if it is understood. However, it has fallen into bad company. Too many think of "fellowship" in terms of bean suppers, class meetings and the like. These things may be properly considered expressions of fellowship, but fellowship itself is a much deeper experience.

Fellowship (*koinonia*), as John uses it, involves a deep and mutual sharing. That which is shared becomes the principle factor in an intimate personal affinity. Paul uses this same word in I Corinthians 10:16 to describe the close tie of the members of the body as they share in the Lord's supper. He uses this communion as the basis of an appeal for unity among the members of the congregation. In II Corinthians 6:14, this word is used (translated "agreements") from a negative point of view to demonstrate the absurdity of such a close relationship between the temple of God and idols.

Perhaps the idea of fellowship can be illustrated in this way. If a man from a distant planet were to arrive on Earth and establish any kind of rapport with Earth people, he would first of all have to find some common factor in the lives of the two worlds. Friendly and familiar communion could be had then on the basis of that which was shared.

So it is with Christian Fellowship. John says that he is declaring what he has seen and heard of the Word of life in order to provide a common ground of meeting with his readers. The present tense of "may have" (which I have rendered "may keep on having") indicates that they were indeed already having this fellowship. John's passion is that they shall continue in it. This is only possible when they share with him the reality of the Incarnation.

It is, moreover, not just fellowship with himself, as a witness of the incarnation which is at stake. It is, more significantly, fellowship with God Himself. To deny that God did indeed . . . "so love the world that He gave His *only begotten Son*," (John 3:16) is to destroy the only foundation upon which any intimate communion between God and man can be based!

Still further, this friendly and familiar communion is with the Incarnate Word, Whom we know as Jesus, God's Son. The Hebrew writer describes the basis of our fellowship with Jesus in these words:

"Since then the children are *sharers* in flesh and blood, He also Himself in like manner partook of the same; that through death he might bring to nought him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver them who through fear of death were all their *lifetime* subject to bondage. For verily not to angels doth He give help, but He giveth help to the seed of Abraham. Wherefore it behooved Him in all things to be made *like unto His brethren*, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succor them that are tempted." (Hebrews 2:14-18)

It was in order to establish this fellowship that "the Word became flesh." (John 1:14) To deny the incarnation is to destroy the only basis of any intimate communion with the Word.

d. Secondary Purpose of John's writing . . . v.4

(4) "We are writing this in order that our joy may continue as it has already been fulfilled."

A great deal of personal satisfaction and spiritual pleasure comes from being instrumental in bringing lost men into the divine fellowship. Jesus claimed this joy in teaching the Apostles the medium in which successful prayer is to be said. In John 15, He intimates that a personal attachment to Him through His word establishes the communication necessary with God. With this done, they are invited to ask whatever they will for themselves in the accomplishment of the divine purpose of fruit bearing and it shall be theirs. "These things I have spoken," He said, "that my *joy* may be in you, and that your *joy* may be made full."

The joy of Jesus was fulfilled many times over as the first century church turned pagan cities upside down with the Gospel. The joy of the apostles also became full as they watched their witness spread the fellowship from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the uttermost part of the earth. (Cf. Acts 1:8)

Now as John writes, the first century is drawing to a close. He is the last remaining of the twelve, and he is nearly one hundred years old. On the horizon there looms the spectre of a false doctrine which threatens to destroy the fellowship for which Christ died and for which he and the other eleven have given their lives. There is a great deal of personal feeling involved as John pens the words: "We are writing this in order that our joy may continue as it has already been fulfilled."

E. *Questions for Review*

1. Why is the gnostic problem answered by John relevant in our time?
2. What is meant by "God In A Test Tube?" In what way does the experience of John with the Incarnate Word prove the fact of God's being? (See John 14:1-9)
3. What one of the twelve Apostles demanded "scientific proof" of the resurrection? (See John 20:24-25)
4. Why does John say "What" rather than "Whom" in I John 1:1?
5. Name some specific incidents in the life of Jesus which John could still see "in his mind's eye."
6. What specific incidents in John's relationship with Jesus gave him opportunity to actually touch Him?
7. What are John's qualifications to write this message?
8. What is the purpose of the parenthesis in I John 1:2?
9. What difference does the Incarnation make in the means by which we may understand life?
10. What is the key word of I John?
11. What is the real meaning of the word "*fellowship*" as used by the New Testament writers?
12. With whom do we have fellowship on the basis of the Apostolic witness to the Incarnation according to I John 1:3?
13. Does John write to bring people into the fellowship or to maintain those who are already in it?
14. What does the meaning of the word *Fellowship* teach us about the necessity of the Incarnation? (Cf. Hebrews 2:14-18)
15. In addition to his concern that his readers remain in the fellowship of the Father and the Son, what is John's personal reason for this writing?