

Mercy Hill Church
1 John
The Prologue of 1 John – Session 1
1 John 1:1-4

Main Point

Fellowship with God and other believers begins and ends with Jesus.
Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What is the most meaningful letter, card, or email you've ever received? What made it so special?

Read 1 John 1:1-4 and compare it with the prologues of 2 John 1:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2; and Philippians 1:1-2. What is different about the beginning of 1 John from these other New Testament letters?

What does John set you up to expect from his letter based on this prologue?

John the beloved disciple wrote 1, 2, and 3 John, but 1 John reads more like a sermon than a letter. Although the letter reads like a sermon, parts of it clearly indicate that John wrote to a specific group of people with specific problems. John wrote as a pastor dealing with concerns the congregation faced, and he wanted to show that fellowship with God and other believers is based on a correct understanding of who Jesus is and what He came to do.

Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

Compare 1 John 1:1-4 and John 1:1-14. How are these two passages similar? What common themes and phrasings do you see? What is the distinct difference between the two?

The opening verses of 1 John consist of a prologue, or introduction, that may remind us of the beginning of the Gospel of John (John 1:1-18). The introductions to both of these books contain similarities in phrasing and vocabulary. The prologue to the Gospel of John stresses the eternal nature of Jesus (the Word of God) and His deity. The Letter of 1 John, in contrast, recognizes the deity of the Word but emphasizes His real humanity.

Have a volunteer read 1 John 1:1-4.

What does John tell us about Jesus, the “word of life”?

One of the main reasons John wrote this letter was to refute a false teaching that the church was encountering. Based on the statements John makes in verse 1, what do you think the false teaching involved?

John directed this emphasis on Jesus' humanity against the claims of the false teachers who taught that Jesus only seemed to be human. Some of the heretics believed that Jesus was merely a phantom. They denied the reality of the incarnation. One of the purposes of 1 John was to confront false teachings about Christ and salvation.

How do these statements in verse 1 give John authority to speak to us about Jesus?

John and the other apostles had reliability and authority as eyewitnesses of the truth they proclaimed. They based their witness on the evidence of what they had seen, heard, and experienced—not on speculation. In Jesus, the Word of Life was manifested in a way that could be seen and even touched.

If you were giving an “eyewitness” testimony about Jesus, what would you include based on your personal interaction with Him?

What additional truths about Jesus does John state in verse 2?

The apostle interrupted his thought with a parenthesis in verse 2. The life God gives to humankind was revealed historically in Jesus Christ. People could see and hear the eternal Word. John identified the life and the Word as one. John recorded three things about the life manifested in Christ. First, it was eternal life. Second, the life was with the Father, implying a personal relationship. Third, John was witness to the life.

In verse 3, John writes about having fellowship with other believers. Why is fellowship so important to the Christian life?

What does Christian fellowship involve? What sets it apart from other kinds of fellowship?

John wanted others to be able to enter into and enjoy Christian fellowship. Fellowship is the familiar Greek word “koinonia” and stresses the partnership believers have both with God and with other Christians. Believers share in the life given in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 1:9). Such fellowship that only believers enjoyed included the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

Why is it impossible to have fellowship with God if you do not accept that Jesus is His Son?

Why is it impossible to have spiritual fellowship with another believer if both of you do not accept that Jesus is God in human flesh?

Fellowship can only exist among those who hold to the biblical truths about Jesus. Any person or group calling himself, herself, or itself “Christian,” but denying the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus lies outside the sphere of genuine fellowship with God and true believers.

Verse 4 reveals John’s purpose for writing this letter. What was it?

In the last verse of his prologue, John gave the purpose for writing these things: “that our joy may be complete.” When we accept Christ as Savior, we experience but the beginning of joy. John had such pastoral concern for his readers that he could not be completely happy until they too were experiencing fullness of joy in Christ. Such joy results from knowing genuine fellowship in Christ. John’s purpose in witnessing for Christ was to lead others to salvation and fellowship with God. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the basis of eternal life and fellowship with God and other believers.

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Throughout Christian history, the question of who Jesus is and why He came has sparked heated debate. In our pluralistic culture, exclusive and ultimate claims about Jesus are not always welcomed. What we believe about Jesus is of central importance and shapes our lives; we must get it right about Jesus—He is to be encountered, experienced, and enjoyed.

Is it difficult to think of Jesus Christ sharing common human experiences with us? If so, what does this say about our view of Christ’s humanity? Ask people to read John 4:6, Luke 2:52; John 19:28; Matthew 26:37; and Mark 4:38 to get a picture of Jesus’ human experiences.

How does knowing with certainty that Jesus is God help you deal with the uncertainties of your life?

We joyfully relate to the Father and to one another because of our life in Jesus Christ. Are you rejoicing in your relationship with the Lord? With other believers? If not, what are some of the things that have been stealing the joy of your salvation?

Pray

Close in prayer by thanking God for Jesus’ incarnation and its implications for our lives. Thank God for making a way for us to be restored to a right relationship with Him. Also pray that each of us would appreciate and take joy in our relationship with Jesus and would want to share it with others.

Commentary

1 John 1:1-4

Verses 1-4 form a prologue for 1 John, telling us that throughout the rest of the book John will proclaim to us what he has observed about Jesus, the Word of life. It begins in an odd way. He said he had heard, seen, and touched the Word of life. Why would John talk about hearing, seeing, and touching Jesus? The answer seems to be related to false teaching that his readers were hearing. More than likely, false teachers were suggesting that Jesus' physical body was not a normal body; or that He was an angel, not a man; or that His physical body was an illusion; or some other erroneous speculation. John met this false teaching head-on by saying that he had firsthand experience with Jesus, and based on that experience, he is telling us what he knows about Jesus.

That which was from the beginning might refer to Jesus' eternal coexistence with the Father, or to the beginning of creation (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1), but in light of the context, John was probably referring to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It seems that false teachers had spread bad information about Jesus. However, John was with Jesus from the very beginning of His ministry on earth. Based on that firsthand experience, John determined to set the record straight. The false teachers, whom John called "antichrists," brought new ideas about Jesus, not ideas that could be verified, firsthand, from the beginning of Jesus' ministry. These false teachers apparently denied the incarnation (God's taking on human flesh in the person of Jesus), a fact that could easily be refuted by eyewitnesses, of whom John was one. The word of life might be a name or title for Jesus, or it might mean "the message about life." Either interpretation is possible. This life is eternal, was originally with the Father, and now has appeared on earth. This supports the historic Christian teaching that Jesus is coequal and coeternal with God the Father (as well as the Holy Spirit, who is not mentioned in this passage).

John proclaimed what he knew about Jesus so that you too may have fellowship with us. Since John made it clear in 2:12-14 that the readers of this letter were already believers, he was not referring to the fellowship with other Christians that begins at salvation. Rather, he was referring to the ongoing fellowship of people who are already believers. They needed to be sure of who Jesus was and of their salvation. If they doubted their salvation, their fellowship with the Father and Son would be limited. If Christians are not in fellowship with God, they cannot be in full fellowship with other devout Christians. Christian-with-Christian fellowship is rooted in fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. Apparently, the false teachers had called into question the salvation of the readers, so John was reaffirming their faith.

The prologue concludes by linking John's own joy with the spiritual welfare of his readers. He reaffirmed these truths so that their joy could be made complete. John was so concerned about their welfare that he could not experience complete joy himself as long as they were struggling with doubt created by these false teachers. If the readers had their salvation reaffirmed, their joy would be made full, and in their joy, John's joy would be made full.