

## Life with Father

by Ray C. Stedman

With this message, we begin a study of the first letter of the Apostle John. You will remember that from Paul we learned it was the task of the apostles to lay the foundation of the church, the only foundation which men can lay, which is Jesus Christ. But each of the apostles has a specific function in laying this foundation. Paul does not do the same thing as John, Peter has a different task than Paul or John, and Jude is called to yet another ministry. They all have a very important task, but God commits something original to each of these men to be passed along to us.

Watchman Nee, in his very helpful book, *What Shall This Man Do?* suggests that these three ministries of John, Peter, and Paul can be distinguished by, and are characterized by, the tasks that each of these men were performing when they were called of God:

- Peter, for instance, was called as a fisherman, and we are told in the Gospels that the moment of his call occurred when the Lord found him casting a net into the sea. That work of fishing for men is characteristic of the Apostle Peter. He is always beginning things, initiating new programs. To him was committed the keys of the kingdom by which he could open the door to the new things God was introducing. On the day of Pentecost he used one of those keys and as a result caught 3,000 fish in his gospel net. You find that characteristic of this man all through his written ministry.
- To the Apostle Paul, however, was committed a different task. When Paul was called he was a tentmaker. He made things. He built things. This, then, was the ministry committed to the Apostle Paul. He is a builder. He not only lays the foundation, but he builds upon it. He calls himself “a wise master-builder” and to

this man, this mighty apostle, was committed the task of building the great doctrinal foundation upon which the Christian faith rests.

- But John is different than both of these. When John was called he was found mending his nets. John is a mender. His written ministry comes in after the church has been in existence for several decades, and at a time when apostasy had begun to creep in. There was need of a voice to call people back to the original foundations and that is the ministry of the Apostle John. He calls men back to truth. When we begin to drift, when some false concept creeps into our thinking or into our actions, it is John who is ordained of the Lord to call us back, to mend the nets and to set things straight.

We will find that to be his ministry particularly in these letters. We shall read the first four verses, which constitute his introduction to this first letter:

**That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest and we saw 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 may have fellowship with us, and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy [or, your joy] may be complete. {1 Jn 1:1-4 RSV}**

Three things are highlighted for us in this introduction: A relationship, a fellowship, and a joy that follows. But it must all begin with this matter

of relationship, for John is concerned first about the family of God. John and Peter and Paul all have different ministries, as I have suggested. It was Peter's task to talk about the kingdom of God, Paul about the church of God, but John is concerned with the family of God. These are all the same thing, but they are viewed from three different aspects. It is into the intimacy of the family circle, now, that the Apostle John takes us. Therefore this letter can be properly described as introducing us to life with the Father, the intimacy of the family circle of God.

If you read through the letter, as I hope you will many times while we are studying together, you will find there are four different reasons John gives for writing this letter:

- One is in the passage just read, Verse 4. "And we are writing this that your joy may be complete."
- Then in Chapter 2, Verse 1, he says, "My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin."
- And in Chapter 2, Verse 26, he gives us the third reason: "I write this to you about those who would deceive you."
- In Chapter 5, Verse 13, he gives us the fourth reason: "I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life."

If you think about these four reasons for a moment you will find something remarkable about them. He is first concerned about the joy of companionship which is, of course, the solution to the problem of loneliness. There is nothing more helpful in curing loneliness than a family circle. When you get lonely where do you want to go? Home, to the family! So John writes, "I write this that your joy may be full," answering the fear and problem of loneliness. Then he says, "I am writing this so that you may not sin." Here he is dealing with another great threat to human happiness, the problem of guilt. Again he says, "I write this to you about those who would deceive you." In other words he is writing to protect us, in order that we might be free from deception. Here is another great problem

area of life: Where do we get answers? How do we know what is true? That is what this letter is written for, that we might be free from deception. Finally he says, "I am writing this to assure you" – that you might find security, freedom from failure. Who of us is not concerned with that? How do you find your way through life successfully? How do we know we are not going to fail? John says, "I write this in order that you might have assurance," be secure, free from failure.

Now let us go back to these opening verses and see what he has to say. These are tremendously important verses.

1. First, he is talking about a relationship:

**That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – {1 Jn 1:1 RSV}**

It is evident he is talking about a person, whom, he says is "from the beginning." This is one of the favorite phrases of the Apostle John "from the beginning."

There are at least three "beginnings" in the Bible:

- The Bible opens with the phrases, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," {Gen 1:1}. That is the beginning of the material creation, of matter. How far back it goes no one knows. That verse encompasses the very dawn of creation and it is impossible for us to tell how far back it is. Neither science nor Scripture answers. Science suggest it was millions of years ago, and Scripture is quite ready to accommodate that. As Dr. J. Vernon McGee puts it, "you can go back squillions of years and there is still ample room." The first beginning is the beginning of creation.
- Now, in the Gospel of John there is another "beginning." That Gospel begins with these words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," {John 1:1 RSV}.

That beginning goes back before creation. That is the unbeginning beginning, the beginning that is eternal. That simply means at the starting point. We humans have to start somewhere in our thinking. We are finite creatures and we must always have a starting point. We have to start with *A* in order, eventually, to arrive at *Z*, and it is that *A* which John is describing in the Gospel. Before there was anything at all, there was the Word. That Word was a Person, and he was with God, and he was God. That is the farthest point backward that we can go.

- But now, in this letter, there is still a third beginning, “that which was from the beginning.” Here John does not mean either the time of creation or the unbeginning beginning, the timeless beginning. He is referring to a definite matter here for he uses this phrase many times. Note a few places where he uses it and you will see how he uses it:
  - ⇒ In Chapter 2, Verse 7, he says “Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment which you had from the beginning.”
  - ⇒ In Verse 14, he says, “I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.”
  - ⇒ In Verse 24, he says, “Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father.”
  - ⇒ In Chapter 3, Verse 8, “He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning.”
  - ⇒ Verse 11, “For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.”

It is difficult to locate this beginning, is it not? It seems to shift from time to time. It is what we might call the contemporary beginning, or, to use a very popular phrase these days that few really understand, the existential beginning. That simply means

“the beginning I am experiencing right now.” John is really referring to the continuous experience of the Christian life, which is contemporary all the time, new and fresh and vital, a continuous beginning which is eternal. It has been available for all time, but you only began it when you came to know Jesus Christ. The writers of the New Testament began it when they came to know him, and John began it when he first knew him. It relates to him who is from the beginning. Now that is about as far as we can go in understanding that, for this is a timeless beginning that is right now, an eternal now.

It is, however, important, for John warns all through this letter that we must cling only to that which is “from the beginning.” If someone comes to you with something new, he says, don’t believe it. It must be from the beginning. The cults today say, “Look, we have something different, additional, something that has come along much later in history than the Bible; we have an additional revelation to give you.” Say to them, “Keep it. I want that which is from the beginning.” John reminds us frequently, go back to that which is from the beginning.

Now he says this one from the beginning is a Person, and he has been seen and heard and handled. In other words, Christian faith rests upon great facts, the acts of a human being in history. We have stressed this before in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Our Christian faith does not rest simply on ideas, or doctrinal statements. That is why becoming a Christian is not simply a matter of joining a church, or believing a certain creed, or signing a doctrinal statement. That has nothing to do with becoming a Christian. John points out that becoming a Christian is to be related to a Person.

All of us are related to someone. We live in families. God delights ‘to set the solitary in families.’ Children are related to their parents, and parents to their children. Why? Because they share the same life. And that is what makes a Christian, to share the life of God by relationship to a Person, the only Person who has that life, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of

God. At the close of this letter John tells us, "He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life," {1 Jn 5:12 RSV}. It is that simple. No matter how religious you may be, you do not have life if you do not have the Son, you are not a Christian. John makes this crystal clear at the beginning of his letter, calling us back to these fundamental things.

That which was from the beginning, he says, is a real Person. We looked at him, we heard him, we touched him, he actually appeared in history. He is an historical being. We knew him, we had fellowship with him, we lived with him, we ate with him, we slept with him, we heard his words, we have never forgotten them. This is the point to which all objections to Christianity are ultimately directed, an attempt to destroy this basis of fact. The forces which seek to overthrow Christian faith today try to undermine our confidence in the facts of Scripture, these great historical truths about a Person who appeared in time. That is why it is not at all unimportant that we should believe the story as it is recorded in the Gospels. We must believe these facts. We cannot believe merely in ideas, doctrinal statements. We must come down at last to factual things, facts, acts of God in history.

Now that is where John begins. He tells us what he himself experienced. We touched him, he says, we felt his warm, human flesh, we looked into his human eyes, we felt the beating of his human heart, and yet, as we did, we became aware that we were listening to the heart-beat of God, and in contact with the life of God. He took that life and laid it down in order that we might have it. He gave it to us through the cross and that life is what makes us part of the family.

Now he goes on to say, in Verse 2, that this life was made manifest, made visible. Twice he says it. What does he mean by it? He means that this eternal life was visible in the relationship of the Father and the Son. Jesus did not come to show us God, he came to show us man related to God. As you look at the life of Jesus you will see this secret relationship, this lost secret of humanity, this new way by which man is intended to live – a continual dependence upon the life of the Father. Look at the earthly life of Jesus and this is exactly what

you see. He keeps saying, "I don't do these things, it's not I who accomplishes these works, it is the Father who dwells in me," {cf, John 14:10}. He is continually reminding people that he says only what the Father is saying through him that they are not his words, he simply looked to God and trusted God to be working through him, leading him to think the thoughts and to say the things that God wanted him to say. In doing this he expressed exactly the mind of God. It is that life that John is talking about, a new way of living, a new way of reacting to situations in dependence upon God.

Last Saturday night in Southern California a Christian man came up to me and said, "I've been a professional baseball player all my life. I learned early that in order to be a success I had to have self-confidence. I had to be confident to be able to do things. I became one of the top players in my league, and I did it by being self-confident. Now you tell me that this is not the way, that I'm not to have confidence in myself but to have confidence in God in me. How do you do this?" I replied, "It's very simple. You must renounce your confidence in yourself and recognize that God, working through you, can do far more than you could ever do by confidence in yourself; that there would be an eternal effect if it is God at work in you. When you are confident in yourself all that you accomplish is what you can see. But when God is at work in you, you not only accomplish what you can see but far more that you can't see. You change lives. People are affected permanently and you leave an impression behind that is not forgotten. That's tremendously different." He said, "I think I see what you mean, but I have a great deal of difficulty with this." I told him, "I know you do. This is one of the hardest things to learn because it is a wholly different way of life than the way we were brought up. But it is the way that was manifest in the Lord Jesus himself. He lived this way. The explanation of that one unforgettable life is that he demonstrated what it means to walk in continual dependence upon a God who dwelt within him."

"This life was manifest," John says, "and we are going to tell you about it, we are going to proclaim it to you."

2. Then he says that this life will result in two wonderful things: First, fellowship. Here John comes to the most beautiful thing about family life – fellowship, companionship:

**that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; {1 Jn 1:3a RSV}**

What is fellowship? In the Navy we used to say it was two fellows on the same ship, and there is a sense in which that is true. They do have something in common – the same ship. That is the basis of fellowship for essentially this word means “to have all things in common.” When you have something in common with another you can have fellowship with him. If you have nothing in common, you have no fellowship. We all have things in common. We share human life in common. Most of us share American citizenship in common. We have many things in common. But John is talking about that unique fellowship which is only the possession of those who share life in Jesus Christ together, who have this different kind of life, this new relationship. This makes them one and that is the basis for the appeal of Scripture to live together in tenderness and love toward one another. Not because we are inherently wonderful people or remarkable personalities, or that we are naturally gracious, kind, loving, and tender all the time – for at times we are grouchy, scratchy, and irritating to others. But we are still to love one another. That is his point. Why? Because we share life together. We have something in common. We share the life of the Lord Jesus, and therefore we have fellowship with one another.

Ah, but that is not all, and it cannot be all. There is not only the horizontal relationship but that, in turn, depends upon a vertical one. He goes on, “and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” We shall discover, as we go on as Christians, that the horizontal relationship is directly related to the vertical one. If the vertical is not right, the horizontal one will be wrong, and, if it is wrong, it is because something is wrong between us and the Father. If we want to

straighten out the horizontal relationship, that of getting along with our fellow Christians and fellow men, we must be sure that the vertical one is straight. Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Now fellowship there means exactly the same thing it means elsewhere. It means having things in common. Here we come to the most remarkable thing about Christian life, communion, or fellowship with Christ. It really takes two English words to bring out what this really means. There is, first of all, a partnership, i.e., the sharing of mutual interests, mutual resources, mutual labor together. God and I, working together, a partnership. All that I have is put at his disposal. Well, what do I have? I have me. I have my mind, my body. True, these are gifts of God, but they are put at my disposal to do with as I please. That is what I have, and now I put them at his disposal. When I do I discover something most remarkable. Everything that he is, is put at my disposal. Is that not marvelous? The greatness of God, the wisdom, the power, the glory of his might – all is made available to me, when I make myself available to him. This is the great secret of fellowship.

This means that he makes available to me that which I desperately lack, wisdom and power, the ability to do. There are things I know I want to do, things I would like to do because it is his will, what he wants. But I can only do them as I make myself available to him, depending upon him to come through from his side, making himself available to me. Then I discover that I can do what I want to do. That is what Paul says: “I can do all things, through Christ who strengthens me,” {cf, Phil 4:13}.

But it is not only partnership, there is also friendship. Friendship and partnership together spell fellowship. Have you ever thought of this, that God desires you to be his friend? What do you do with a friend? You tell him secrets. That is what friends are for. You tell them intimate things, secrets. And God wants to tell us secrets. Jesus said to his disciples, “I have not called you servants, but I have called you friends,” {John 15:15}. He said this in a context in which he was attempting to impart to them the secrets of life. Now God will do this,

he wants to do it. This is what that wonderful word, fellowship, means. But it will be as you are able to bear these secrets. As you grow along with him you will discover that your eyes are continually being opened to things you never saw before. God will tell you secrets about yourself, about life, about others around you, about everything, imparting these to you because that is part of fellowship. That is what we are called to. The fellowship is based upon the relationship. You cannot have the fellowship until you first come to Christ and receive him. When you have the Son you are related to the Father, and when you are related to him, you can have fellowship with him.

3. Then, when you have fellowship, you have the third thing that John mentions. These things we are writing, he says, "that your joy may be full." I want to close on that note for that is where John closes his introduction, but I want to use a different term than joy. In some ways it is not as descriptive and accurate a term as joy, for joy is compounded of many things. Joy is an excellent word here, but perhaps it will be more helpful for us to understand what John means if we use the word, excitement. "That your excitement may be complete." Joy is a kind of quiet inner excitement and this is what results when we really experience the fellowship that John is talking about.

When we discover that God is actually using us, it is the most exciting and joy-producing experience possible to men. I have seen it happen many, many times. I have seen young people get so excited over this that they literally jump up and down. There is a dear girl in this congregation that cannot relate what the Lord does without literally bouncing as she tells it. I have seen men, familiar with the world of high finance who work continually in

the great marts of trade, get so excited over the fact that God was using them in some simple way that they literally trembled as they told it. I have known women who have discovered how exciting it is to have God at work in their neighborhood, using their kitchen, and their coffee pot, that they have not been able to sleep at night. They are overwrought with excitement, with joy. That is what John is talking about, life, as life was intended to be lived, filled with joy.

Oh yes, with many pressures! Do not make the mistake of thinking that the only way to have joy is to be free from pressures or problems. No, take all the pressures and the problems, but with them that wonderful feeling down inside that God is at work, and he is at work in you. You are a vital part of God's program. God is using you to do his eternal work. There is nothing more exciting than that. That is what John is writing about.

That is worth listening to, is it not?

#### **Prayer:**

Our Father, we pray that thou will take our eyes that have been so befuddled by false concepts, superficial, childish, teddy-bear concepts of Christianity, and help us to see the truth. Make us to understand what these words are describing. Convey to us, Lord, something of the richness and the glory of this relationship of life in Jesus Christ, the warmth of fellowship with him when everything that we are is made available to him and we are experiencing all the wonderful joy of everything that he is made available to us. Teach us this in practice, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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