

What is the Message?

1 John 1:1-4

Turn to 1 John 1 please. Today I want to answer this question: what is the message? What is the Christian message? John begins his letter with a particular emphasis about what exactly Christians proclaim. What is the message? What is it that we proclaim and announce? What truth brings us together here today, what gathers us one more Lord's Day, the last Sunday of 2023?

Let's read. 1 John 1:1 – *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched: he is the Message of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.*

Review from John 1:1-5

John wrote this for churches that already had the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John began, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

“In the beginning.” John’s Gospel began that way because Genesis began that way. “In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth.” So John’s Gospel starts with that beginning. “Back there in the beginning, when God made the heavens and the earth, the Word was already there. In that beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, back there in the beginning, when God made the heavens and the earth.”

In Genesis 1, God created everything by speaking. God said, “let there be light,” and there was light. John’s Gospel separates God from his own Speech, John makes God’s Speech a separate Person from God. There’s God, and then there’s God’s Word, God’s Speech, God’s Message, a separate being.

It's like separating a light fixture from the light that comes out from it. Hebrews 1 says that the Son is the radiance of God’s glory. Glory pours out of God. The Son is that radiance, according to Hebrews. In John, the Son is the Word of God, the Message of God. And John’s Gospel said that the Word became flesh and lived with us, the Message became flesh and lived with us.

We Lived with the Message

So now we are up to 1 John, the Letter of John to his churches, and he begins his letter, “That which was from the beginning.” He means “the Word” which he explained at the beginning of his Gospel. I’ve been translating the Greek *logos* as “Message” instead of “Word,” just so we’ll take a fresh look at it. Now let’s read our 1 John text again:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched: he is the Message of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.

Can you feel John's particular emphasis on what the Message is? We (1) heard it, we (2) saw it (3) with our eyes, we (4) looked at it, our (5) hands (6) touched it. This we proclaim. It (7) appeared to us, we've (8) seen it and (9) heard it.

John and the other disciples lived with Jesus for about three years. They saw the Holy Spirit come on Jesus when John baptized him, and they watched him live, led by and filled with the Spirit. They heard the Lord's conversations with others, his conversations with them, his public teaching and his private teaching. They heard him pray, they heard him pray with loud cries and tears, they saw him do all kinds of miracles.

They saw him angry, and they saw him cry, and they saw him exhausted, and in great distress. They saw him regularly withdraw so he could pray alone. They saw him hold his tongue when others were furious with him. They saw him tempted and struggle desperately to stay faithful to God. They saw him command demons who were always afraid of him and always obeyed him.

They watched him forgive people's sins. They saw him raise people from the dead and they saw him calm a storm, and walk on the water. They did not see Jesus rise, nobody did, but over a period of 40 days they saw him often, eating with him and talking with him. They saw the scars on his hands and feet. Then they saw him rise into the God-cloud. They heard the angels tell them that this same Jesus would come back the same way. What we saw and heard and touched we proclaim to you.

So, what is the Message? It is all of that, it is all that they heard and with their ears and saw with their eyes and touched with their hands. The Word became flesh and lived with us, the Message became human and lived with us. Because God loved the world, he had a Message for the world. God had something he wanted to say to the world. God turned what he wanted to Say into a Person. God turned his Message into a Person, Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean Jew who lived in Palestine 2000 years ago.

The important story of Jesus begins with John the Baptist, and it ends with Jesus' death and burial and resurrection, and all of it connected to the Old Testament. They always tied the gospel story of Jesus to the Old Testament. That person, for those years, is God's Message to the world. The person of Jesus is himself the Message that the Old Testament foretold.

What is the Gospel?

The gospel is the life of Jesus. The gospel is not “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” That’s how we respond to the gospel, but in the early church, that was not the gospel.

We say that we have Four Gospels, Matthew Mark Luke and John. I myself have talked like that in this sermon. The apostles themselves and the writers would have been horrified. Four gospels? That’s heresy? There is only one gospel! The ancient title is “the Gospel *according to Matthew*,” “The Gospel *according to Mark*,” and so on. The four gospel writers each gave their version of the one gospel. (Only NASB and NRSV gave the proper title at the beginning of these writings.)

There is one gospel, and it is the life of Jesus. The whole writing we call “Matthew” is “the gospel *according to Matthew*.” The story of Jesus, in detail, that’s the gospel. The gospel is the life of Jesus.

There are a few summaries of the gospel in other parts of the New Testament. Paul summarizes the gospel in Romans 1, and Paul has another summary in 1 Corinthians 15. Peter preaches the gospel on the day of Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2. All of these summarize the life of Jesus, with some mention of the Old Testament.

Our four accounts of the one gospel, Matthew’s, Mark’s, Luke’s, and John’s, are together almost half of the New Testament. To be more precise, these four accounts are 46% of the New Testament. The first 46% of the New Testament is pure gospel, pure good news, because it’s what the apostles saw with their eyes and heard with their ears and touched with their hands. That’s what they proclaimed and announced.

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. What we saw and heard and touched, that’s the message, that’s the proclamation, that’s the gospel.

We want you, says John, to have fellowship with us, and if you want fellowship with us, that’s how it works. No compromise on that. And our fellowship is with the Father and the Son, so if you want fellowship with us and the Father and the Son, that’s how it works. If you would have fellowship with us, says John, we would be full of joy. John has a reason for being so blunt about that; we’ll get to it in a few minutes.

How do We Now Hear the Message?

So the person of Jesus himself, especially his life from John’s baptism to Jesus’ resurrection, is the message, the gospel. But only a small number of people were close enough to see and hear the message. There were the original twelve, and then Jesus had a crowd of Galilean followers, men and women who also left their homes for a while to follow him around.

But what about us? This is what God has put in place: we have four careful accounts of what Jesus said and did. The Holy Spirit uses these stories to draw people to Jesus. The Holy Spirit and the stories together draw people to Jesus, it is enough for people to bow to Jesus and worship him. The stories are gospel proclamation and announcement to us.

The stories plus the Spirit lead us to say, “Jesus, you are Lord of heaven and earth, and you have full rights to my life.” The stories and the Spirit are how we hear the message.

Why this Beginning to 1 John? 2 John 7; 1 John 4:2–3; 2:22

Turn to 2 John. John begins this way because of false teaching in his churches. Some teachers in his churches did not like it that the Eternal Word became flesh, a human with a body and all the normal human weaknesses. They liked it that he was the Son, full of grace and truth, in the embrace of the Father, but they did not like it that the Message became flesh.

We should take this to heart because popular evangelical theology tends to go down the same road. We don’t deny the Lord’s humanity, we are too orthodox for that, but we do tend to glorify him in a way that leave his flesh behind.

2 John 7 I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.

The three letters of John are arranged longest to shortest because that’s how the early believers set it up, but they were written in the opposite order, 3 John then 2 John then 1 John. So John wrote this warning about deceivers denying the Lord’s flesh before he wrote 1 John. Here it is again: *Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.*

1 John 4:2–3 This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

These false teachers, these antichrists, connected the name “Jesus” to his flesh, his weak humanity. And this they did not want. They wanted the eternal glorious Son of God, but not the real meaty earthy Jesus that the apostles saw and heard and touched. That’s why John begins as he does.

I’m going to repeat my summary of the gospel, the message: John and the other disciples lived with Jesus for about three years. They saw the Holy Spirit come on Jesus when John baptized him, and they watched him live, led by and filled with the Spirit. They heard the Lord’s conversations with others, his conversations with them, his public teaching and his private teaching. They heard him pray with loud cries and tears, they saw him do all kinds of miracles.

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Which Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lord, the Ruler of the kings of the earth? That Jesus. Which Jesus is our eternal high priest, who always lives to pray for us and intercede for us? That Jesus. Which Jesus is the chief shepherd over all elders, the overseer and shepherd of all our souls? That Jesus. When we fix our eyes on Jesus, let's be clear which Jesus that is. It's the Jesus of Matthew and Mark and Luke and John, the one who was born, the one with scars, the one that's coming back. Amen.

PRAYER: God, thank you for this urgency that you put in John, to make this clear to us again. Thank you for guiding us into your truth that brings life. Thank you for sending your Son. Thank you for turning your Message in a human that lived with us, born and lived and died and rose. John says that taking hold of this is how we can recognize the Spirit of God. Keep our eyes fixed on this Jesus. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.