

“What a Fellowship, What a Joy Divine”

Text:

I John 1:1-4

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen *it*, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship *is* with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.

Introduction:

This is our second time to consider this first paragraph of I John. The first time we looked at John’s position as an eyewitness. This time we are going to examine his purpose in writing. A text is always easier to understand if the author tells us why he is writing. In the case of the authors of the 66 books of the Bible, some state clearly why they are writing others do not. When they don’t it is up to us to deduce the purpose of the book from a careful study of its contents. John, however, leaves no doubt in his writings. At the end of his Gospel, for example, he states: “And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:30-31). This makes it clear that the purpose of his Gospel is to convince us that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and the source of eternal life and salvation.

In the First Epistle he makes several statements as to why he is writing. Towards the end in 5:13 he states: “These things have I written unto you that believe on

the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.” This is certainly one of his major purposes in writing. One need only note the occasions where he uses the verb “to know” to grasp this central theme of this book. We will deal with this in greater detail as the occasion arises, but here are some examples. In 2: 3-5 he writes: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him”. Four times over in these three verses we have to verb “to know”, each time emphasizing how we know that we know God, that is, that we have eternal life. Another example would be 3:14-15: “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not *his* brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him.” There are numerous other examples and we will examine them as we come to them, but for the moment I want us to focus on what John gives as his primary reasons for writing this letter in his opening statement. They are not unrelated to the other reasons he gives and as we work our way through the Epistle it will become clear how all of his stated purposes in writing are related. In verses 3-4 he clearly states that he has two purposes in writing. First that there might be fellowship, and secondly that there might be fullness of joy. The two are not unrelated the second is a direct result of the first.

I. Fellowship

Words are like money; with time they can become devalued. When this happens, we either need to find a new word, or make a conscious effort to recover the true value of the word as it is used in the text we are reading. “Fellowship” as it is commonly used in reference to church life today does not at all communicate what the New Testament means when it uses the word. Today when we use the word it generally implies two things: food and conversation. Now these are not bad things, but when John says that he is declaring to us what he and his fellow

eyewitness have seen and heard in Jesus Christ in order that we might have fellowship, he is not thinking about potato salad and party games. This becomes obvious in the following sentence when he says: “truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

To help us get a clear picture of what John is talking about allow me to make a connection that we will refer to frequently as we make our way through this Epistle. There is an important connection of course between the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John. We will notice similarities after even a cursory reading of them. Even more so there is a very close connection between I John and the farewell discourse of Jesus in John 13-16. Often the concepts Jesus shared with his disciples during his last night on earth underlie what John is teaching us in this Epistle.

Nowhere in the farewell discourse does Jesus use the word “fellowship”, but he does give us one of the clearest images of the kind of fellowship that John is speaking of when he speaks of the vine and the branches in chapter 15. It is also important to point out that Jesus closes this teaching with a statement very similar to what John says here when he says: “These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and *that* your joy might be full” (John 15:11). Fellowship, John says, is first with the Father, and then with his Son, Jesus Christ. If we think about that in light of what Jesus says about the vine and the branches, it is what happens when we abide in Christ and he abides in us. Jesus says that when this happens we bear much fruit and the Father is glorified. To be in fellowship with God, we will see in the following paragraph, is to be walking in the light. God is light, and he has caused his light to shine through Jesus Christ. When we know Christ; when we are vitally connected to him, his life is in us. We are in fellowship with him. The second step is that when we are in fellowship with him, we are in fellowship with one another. Since our life derives from a common source; since we are all branches attached to a common vine, we cannot be in fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ and not be in fellowship with one another.

What we must realize is that this fellowship is not automatic. The key to maintaining fellowship is abiding. This is the key verb in John 15 when Jesus is teaching about the vine and the branches and it is a key verb in I John. Again we will look at these passages as we come to them, but let me give you a few examples: In 2:6 we read: “He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.” In 2:10 we have: “He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him.” And in 3:24 we read: “Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.” To abide in Christ is to be in fellowship with Christ. It is to walk in the light of Christ. It is, we will see, to walk in righteousness and love. When we do, we experience fellowship with God and with God’s people, we bear fruit, and as we shall see, we experience joy. It is for this reason that one of the primary questions we should be asking ourselves as we study through this book is: “What does it mean to abide in Christ or to be in fellowship with Christ, and how do I do it?”

II. Joy

John’s second reason for writing is that “our joy might be full”. The second is directly related to the first. Joy is the fruit of fellowship or as we have seen in John 15 of abiding in the vine. Joy should be our natural state of existence, but it is not what we seek. We seek to be in fellowship with God through Jesus Christ; when we are, joy is the fruit of that fellowship. It is a joy that comes from knowing that our sins have been forgiven, that God is for us, that whatever happens to us God will never leave us or forsake us. This joy is present even in our sadness because it does not come from the circumstances of life, but from the life of Christ that flows through us as we remain attached to the vine.

We must add that our present joy is incomplete. We must not make the mistake of thinking that the joy of this life, as profound as it may be, is ultimate joy. It is an anticipation, a hint of things to come. In our moments of deepest joy we are catching a glimmer of eternity out of the corner of our eye. It is just enough to let

us know that something that is for the present unimaginable awaits us. This is what Paul is talking about when he writes in Ephesians 1:13-14: "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." Joy is the fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit. It is the present experience of fellowship with God and with Christ, which enables us to experience fellowship with one another, but our present fellowship is clouded by the present reality of our human condition of mortality, corruptibility, and sin. It does, however, give us hope. At moments it gets us close enough to our ultimate reality to give us the assurance that that ultimate reality exists. Faith, hope, love, and joy are inseparable. Together they enable us to live in fellowship with God and with one another in the present, and give us a foretaste of our glorious future.

Conclusion

I am going to conclude with an observation, and then ask you to do something based on that observation. The observation is that in the not too distant past Christian instruction focused, as John does in this Epistle, primarily on being in fellowship with God. The idea being that if one was in fellowship with God, the rest would follow. That our ability to handle the problems of life and to live well with others was the fruit of a life lived in fellowship with God. Now this idea has not entirely disappeared, of course, but there does seem to have been some subtle changes. If you peruse the programs of churches there seems to be a lot of focus on human problems, and we seem to sometimes approach those problems in a kind of piecemeal fashion. The questions that seem to prompt our teaching are more human questions. Things like: How can I have a happy marriage? How can I have successful children? How can I be useful in old age? Now these type questions are not in themselves bad questions. We should ask them. I just think that we are sometimes getting the cart before the horse. As we have already seen, and will see even more in the following paragraph, fellowship with one another is the fruit of walking in the light. Walking in the light is abiding in the

vine; it is living in fellowship with God and with Jesus Christ. When this is right then we have fellowship with one another, that is, we will relate properly to our spouses, our children, our friends, and even those outside of Christ.

So here is my challenge to you as we make our way through this very instructive book of the New Testament. I want you to ask yourself questions of two types. First questions like: Am I walking in the light? Am I living in fellowship with God? Am I really abiding in Christ? Is He directing my life? Then we need to ask some “how” questions. Questions on the order of: “What can I do to make sure that I am in fellowship with God? How do I walk in the light? What is it that takes me out of the light? John wrote this book in order to give us the answer to these questions. I think we will all be amazed at how acting on his teaching brings order, purpose and joy to our lives.