OUR FELLOWSHIP

1 John 1:1–4

Key Verse: 1:3

“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.”

In this short prologue to the letter the Apostle John is doing several things at once. But most of all he’s focusing attention on who Jesus is. He says that when we know who Jesus is, we enter into a fellowship, a fellowship both with God the Father, Jesus the Son, and with all who know them personally. It’s a fellowship unlike any other we’ve ever experienced. So in this study we want to think about two things: who is Jesus? And what's the nature of this fellowship that we have in him, with each other, and that we want others to join along with us? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Let’s read verse 1. Here John is describing basically what he calls a “word.” But it’s word that wasn’t just spoken or heard or written, but “seen,” “looked at” and even “touched” with hands. It’s almost like he’s describing discovering an authentic, priceless treasure. And it wasn’t based on other people’s hearsay; it was something John himself and others had actually encountered personally. As John reflects back on this experience, it was, in today’s terms, mind-blowing. Did it really happen? Yes, he says, we heard it, saw it with our eyes, looked at it, and our hands even touched it. We weren’t dreaming. It makes it sound like an object. But then we read what John calls it: “the Word of life” with a capital “W.” He’s talking about a person. Who is it?

Let’s read verse 2. In light of this verse, John is writing about Jesus. He repeats twice in this verse that he “appeared.” In Greek the word can also mean “to make visible what had been hidden or unknown” or “to make manifest by words, deeds or any other way.” This also seems to be why John calls him “the Word.” Like words, Jesus, when he came, revealed things about God that previously had never been expressed or communicated before. Later, John writes that in coming to this world, Jesus, just like spoken words, “has given us understanding” (5:20). It’s like reading an old letter written by someone we didn’t know very well, and as we read it, we finally come to know vividly what that person was really all about.

But Jesus, the Word, wasn’t just a letter; he was a flesh and blood human being. John and the other disciples had heard, seen with their eyes, looked at—their hands even touched him. There was a heresy starting around then that taught that all physical and material things are inherently evil, and therefore, Jesus who was perfect, and only good, couldn’t possibly have had a human body; it only looked like he did. John is writing here to prove that Jesus really was a full-fledged human being, just like one of us. Later he writes that, “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (4:2). In John 1:14 he wrote, “The Word became flesh…” Even in his glorious risen state Jesus has a physical body; the place in his side where he'd been pierced, and the places in his hands where the nails had been—he invited his disciples to look at these places and even reach out and put their hands into them, touch them, and see that it was really him (Jn20:20,25–27). Soon we’re going to see why this is such an important point.

Another key thing we notice in these opening verses is how John says that Jesus was “from the beginning.” Later he even writes that Jesus “is” “from the beginning” (2:13,14). Here in verse 2 he paraphrases what he means as he calls Jesus “the eternal life.” Most of us have heard that Jesus *gives* people eternal life; but here John describes Jesus *himself* as “the eternal life.” It could be a poetic way of saying that in Jesus we receive eternal life, but in this context it also seems to be saying that Jesus existed in eternity. So John also adds that he was “with the Father.” What John is saying in these first two verses reminds us of the opening verses of John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (Jn1:1,2). This phrase John uses, “from the beginning,” reminds us of Jesus’ prayer: “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (Jn17:5). And this phrase, “from the beginning,” reminds us of the vision John writes about in the Book of Revelation: “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: ‘Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades’” (Rev1:17,18). Jesus was from the beginning. He was with the Father in the beginning. It means he’s still alive. He’s the eternal life. And as the Living One he will be there in the end. This Eternal, Living One became flesh, became one of us. John was writing about 60 years after Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. But he’d never forgotten it; it was still so profound, and so amazing.

In fact, John wasn’t just contemplating it; he was proclaiming it. Now let’s read verses 1–3. We notice here how John repeats the word “proclaim.” In Greek the word is *apangellomen*. It means to tell, announce, declare or make known. John and the other apostles who had been with Jesus were not just enjoying reminiscing about the private experiences they’d had with Jesus. They weren’t like some of the secret mystery religions of that time, where everything was hidden and only a few privileged people could share their wisdom in secret. No, they were out proclaiming what they’d seen and heard to as many people as would listen. John uses the word “we” because he was joining his own testimony with all the other eyewitnesses who’d actually been with Jesus. Now that Christianity had spread to other places in the Roman Empire and it was many decades after it all started, there were quite a few people going around saying many things about Jesus based on their own ideas and based on second- or third-hand knowledge. In contrast, John writes based on his own first-hand experience. Though those reading his letter hadn’t actually been there, he wanted them to know with certainty that what he was saying about Jesus was true. Later he writes that Jesus is the one “who is true” (5:20). John was proclaiming Jesus to the end of his life, doing his utmost to make him known, because he was convinced that what he’d experienced with Jesus was true. He wanted Christian communities to know this truth, and in turn, to pass it on.

In a sense John is teaching that every Christian fellowship needs to put proclaiming the truth about Jesus at the center of all we do. Not just our church programs, morals, or good works, but Jesus. We can proclaim Jesus in a lot of ways. St. Francis said, “Preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words.” He was saying we proclaim Jesus in the way we live. We proclaim Jesus by being his hands and feet, by showing his compassion to needy, hurting, lost people. But we also need to actually, verbally, tell people the truth about Jesus, the true story of Jesus, of who he really was and what he really said and did, and what his message really was. This is what all the apostles did. And what was Jesus’ real message? It was the message of the forgiveness of sins (Lk24:46,47). It was the message Peter first shared (Ac2:38), and that Paul also shared (Ac13:38). When we proclaim Jesus, we’re saying that anyone who turns away from sin and turns to Jesus in faith receives God’s forgiveness. In our tendency to be self-centered we easily make everything about us. So Paul wrote, “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2Co4:5). And he wrote, “He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ” (Col1:28). When people hear all the truth about Jesus, mysteriously, they grow in true godliness (1Ti3:16). When proclaiming Jesus is at the center of our fellowship, we grow with Christ as our head and support each other in real love (Eph4:14–16).

In verse 3 John actually states a slightly different purpose in proclaiming the truth about Jesus. Let’s read verse 3 again. Here John proclaims Jesus so that his readers may join in fellowship with him and the first apostles. Of course, because he’s writing a letter, he’s not able physically to be present with these people. But evidently, they’d still be able to have fellowship. Obviously John is talking about a fellowship that’s different from what we’re used to. It’s not just getting together to hang out. It’s a fellowship that we’re drawn into as we believe the truth about Jesus. That means it’s a spiritual fellowship. Still today, believers are drawn into this fellowship with John and the first apostles as we come to know the truth about Jesus. It’s amazing!

So what kind of fellowship is it? Well, we’ve already seen that it’s a fellowship centered on Jesus himself. The fellowship has life, real life, and this life comes from Jesus, the Word of life, the eternal life. It’s a fellowship of individuals who’ve started experiencing eternal life in Jesus. Jesus once said, “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (Jn17:3). Our fellowship is our shared experience of knowing God the Father and Jesus the Son. The fellowship starts not with one another, horizontally, but vertically, with having a personal relationship with him. Jesus said, “On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (Jn14:20). In light of these words, this vertical relationship isn’t mechanical or theoretical; it’s a personal love relationship. But how do we experience it? Jesus said, “Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will them and show myself to them” (Jn14:21). And he said, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (Jn14:23). As we learn what Jesus taught and learn to do what he said, we grow in this living, personal fellowship with Jesus the Son and with God the Father. God has called us into fellowship with Jesus his Son (1Co1:9). It’s a fellowship of knowing the grace of Jesus and the love of God, a fellowship in the presence of the Holy Spirit (2Co13:14). This living fellowship, John says, becomes the source of real fellowship with other believers.

In fact, it’s the only way true fellowship among people becomes possible. Why is that? It’s because we human beings are sinful. Our sins cut us off from God, and they also cut us off from deeper relationships with other people. Our sins are what leave us feeling lonely and empty, and they’re what make all our relationships with other people seem shallow and superficial. But as we grow in a living fellowship with Jesus, we also begin to experience a real, deeper fellowship with all those who know and love him. And it’s these deeper relationships that make us feel really alive. This has quite a few implications for us. If we’re feeling lonely and cut off from others, instead of just trying to be with people, perhaps we should first seek to draw closer to Jesus himself. And if our church fellowship seems superficial or stagnant, perhaps too, we should seek to draw closer to Jesus himself. John says in verse 3b, “And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” Because this fellowship was real and authentic, he had something to share with these people who had not yet experienced it.

The Greek word for “fellowship” here is *koinonia*. It means to “share” or “participate in.” It’s a deeper, richer word than our English word, “fellowship.” It helps us understand both our relationship with God and with other Christians. As we grow in *koinonia* with God the Father and Jesus the Son, it’s not just a relationship where we receive and take. In this relationship we begin to share or participate in the heart of God who so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son (Jn3:16). We begin to share in the mission of Jesus. Jesus told his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (Jn20:21). We may have different specific callings, just as Peter and Paul had (Gal2:9), but we can deeply respect each other and have true and deep fellowship. It’s a fellowship in the grace of Jesus, who gave his life for sinners (Php1:7). It’s a fellowship not where we just try to make use of fellow Christians’ generosity, but a fellowship in which we become close partners in the gospel (Php1:5). And as we share or participate in Jesus’ mission, we even become eager to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death (Php3:10), and we become ever closer to those who suffer for him.

Let’s read verse 4. John is saying here that his joy would be complete as people joined in this authentic fellowship with God the Father, Jesus the Son, and all those who live in him. Later he describes it as the joy of seeing people walking in the truth (2Jn4; 3Jn4). Jesus himself talked about this complete joy. He said it’s like the joy of the friend of the bridegroom, who loves his friend and finally gets to see the beautiful bride united to him in marriage (Jn3:29). Elsewhere Jesus described it as the joy of someone finding what was lost (Lk15:4–7). It’s a joy we share with God the Father and with Jesus the Son. It’s a joy that also characterizes our fellowship.

Today we thought about who Jesus is and the nature of our fellowship. May God help us get to know the truth about Jesu, and experience a deep, personal fellowship with him that’s at the core of who we are and all we do. May God help us proclaim him and experience deep fellowship with those who know, love and serve him. Let's read verse 3 again.