

1 John 1:1-4
Authentic Joy

If you experienced something that was very important for a trial, for a legal proceeding, how would you make it clear that you really were there and that it really happened? How would you clarify I really saw this, I really experienced this? If you think about that, in your testimony in that legal setting, you might use some of the same phrases that John uses here in 1 John chapter 1. You might say not just I saw this, I glanced at it, out of the corner of my eye I saw. No, you'd say I saw this: I studied it. I gazed at it. Perhaps if pressed by an opposing attorney, you would say, I saw it with my own eyes. Obviously, you can't see it with someone else's eyes so of course you saw it with your own eyes, but that's a way we have of expressing the intensity and the certainty of what we're talking about. If it involved something physical, you might, as John says here "I touched it with my hands." It wasn't just something conceptual or I thought about. No, I touched it; it was real.

John here is laying the groundwork of his testimony for the reality of the Christian faith and answering some of the early errors starting to creep into the church even during the 1st century. While the apostles were still alive, distortions were coming into the church and threatening to derail the faith of some. John is establishing his testifying. Now, of course, you may notice that while at the top of the page it says the first letter of John, he doesn't include his name like the apostle Paul does. It was very common in the Ancient World for letters to begin with who it's from and who it's to. We find none of that here. How do we know that this really is the apostle John?

One fascinating detail is that all -- that is 100% -- of the most ancient manuscripts all include a title that mentions John. Very early on, as this letter was written and copied, it was widely acknowledged this is from the apostle John. Within a few decades of when he wrote it, it was used in church services as scripture, read aloud, quoted, memorized. It became part of the fabric of the church very early on. John is telling us, I believe, that his testimony is authentic so that you can share in the authentic joy, hence the title of our message this morning. There's a bit of a play on words there because John is emphasizing the authenticity of his testimony. These things really happened and believing them leads to joy, and it leads to a shared joy and what I keep calling this ever-widening circle of fellowship and partnership that we enjoy together in the truth.

The way the language is structured here it's a bit awkward. He starts with "what." What? What? He starts with what, and he doesn't actually get to a main verb until verse 3. So, some translations have actually rearranged the clauses. As I was studying it, I thought, perhaps that would help us. We certainly want to go through the text in the order that John wrote it; but I think it's helpful to get a bit of a bird's eye view of what he's saying here in 1 John 1:1-4. Here's how I repackaged it if you will:

We proclaim our testimony about:
what we have heard,

seen with our eyes, and
touched with our hands
so that → you may share in our partnership
with God the Father and
His Son Jesus Christ
and
so that → the joy of us all may be complete.

That's another way of looking at what the apostle John is saying here. The apostles gave their lives to testify about the reality of God taking on a human body in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our faith, in their words from God, enables us to share in the joy of their fellowship through the ever-widening circle of that eternal divine fellowship.

This morning, as we look at this "simple" section of just 4 verses, we'll see an eyewitness testimony of the Messiah in verse 1; how this came to be in verse 2; the fact that we didn't keep this to ourselves, John writes, in verse 3. Finally, in verse 4, we want you to share our joy. So that's our roadmap for our time together this morning. Going back to 1 John 1:1, he says

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—

John is explaining here's the content of my testimony. This is what it's about. It's about the things that I'm uniquely qualified to testify about because I was there. Our testimony is a little different. Our testimony is of what the Lord has done in us and through us because we have not seen the Lord physically, but someday we will be with him. He will come and snatch us away. The language here is fascinating. "What we have heard" is an attempt to render a particular Greek construction, so the grammar here "have heard, have seen, have looked at" indicates that the eyewitnesses have been permanently changed by what they saw and heard and touched. You may have heard the expression 'you can't unsee that.' Usually, that's related to something negative that you would like to unsee, you'd like to erase, but you can't. In this case, John is saying through these perfect tense verbs we have seen, we've beheld, we've touched, we've heard. I can't unsee this. It's changed me. What I experienced, what I saw, what I heard, what I touched left an indelible permanent mark upon me. That's how John is introducing his testimony.

I'm especially intrigued with his mention of "touched with our hands." It reminded me of the experience of the disciples after Jesus' resurrection. I'm going to read from Luke chapter 24 if you want to follow along. I'm reading from verses 36 to 40. There in Luke 24 after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Luke records

He Himself stood in their midst and said to them,

The fact that he even says he “stood in their midst” is very appropriate because he didn’t like walk down the hallway and come through the door. No, he was just there. That is, apparently, a design feature of the resurrection body. That might be kind of cool. Maybe the Lord will have reasons for us to be able to do that in our next assignments.

He Himself stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace be to you.” But they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit.

They, in a sense, could not even believe their own eyes at that moment. How many people, skeptics, have said this was all wishful thinking? The disciples wanted Jesus to be alive and so they just imagine seeing him again. In a sense, Luke is helping us understand that’s not the way it is at all. They weren’t looking forward to seeing him. They freaked out. They thought they were seeing a ghost and that was not comforting in any measure.

they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit. And He said to them,

Always gracious.

“Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet.

Still bearing the marks of the crucifixion. Even in his resurrected, perfected body he bears those marks as an eternal testimony of our redemption and the price that was paid. Touch me, he says. This is real. The resurrection was as real as the incarnation. John, again,

we touched with our hands.

You recall in the Gospel of John that they had this time together and oops Thomas didn’t show up for the meeting. Ohh, bummer. He said, you know, unless I can put my hands in the nail prints...he was asking for this level of touching. He said unless I can do that and even put my hand into his side where the spear went -- that sounds a little icky -- he wanted to be sure that it was real. He said unless I can do that, I will never believe. The Lord Jesus so kindly, mercifully, graciously, came again eight days later. There they were. Thomas was with them, and the Lord Jesus said now touch. Put your finger here in the nail prints. Put your hand into my side and see that it is I. He appropriately responded, “*My Lord and my God!*” He believed, gave his life for his testimony.

You may wonder, well, why all this emphasis on the physicality of the incarnation and of the resurrection? That brings us to one of the background points of this epistle. There was a mindset in the Ancient World. I know I've mentioned it a few times. It just seems like it pops up throughout the New Testament. There was this way of thinking in the Ancient World, particularly in areas influenced by Greek thought, that what was material was kind of second class or really way down there and what was ethereal, spiritual, immaterial, ohh, that's the really good part. Even the idea of living in physical bodies was somewhat abhorrent to some people who bought into this mindset. When they were confronted with the reality of the gospel and the incarnation, they said well there's no way that could be because a holy righteous God would never take on a physical icky body. But John is saying no, no. This is the reality. God himself came, and we saw him. We heard him. We touched him.

Some people had tried to kind of fit the two philosophies together, if you will. If I may parallel, perhaps, to those who say well I want to hold on to evolution because I like the idea of being accepted among people who hold to evolution, and I want to say God had a role in the creation, so I'm going to say that God used evolution. This philosophy is called theistic evolution. Perhaps, in a similar way, people said well, yes, God came to the earth but no can't possibly imagine God taking on a physical human body so here's what we'll do. We'll say he just seemed to be human and have a real body. It just looked like that. I mean, he was really good in this illusion of being a real human being. They are called the docetists. Prepare to tune out for 15 seconds. For my Greek students, this is a verb called *dokeó*, meaning I think, I seem.

The docetists said he only seemed to be human. He wasn't really fully human. This idea that the physical world is bad, icky, and the ethereal spiritual world is good. That's called dualism. That dualism philosophy and this docetism that Jesus only seemed to take on a real body, those things were starting to influence the churches. John was concerned about it. Notice how he doesn't start by saying, now regarding these spiritual errors...He just starts with the truth, with his testimony. I know he was real. There's no way he seemed to be real because I was with him. Of course, recall that John leaned on him during the Last Supper. They had this very intimate seating arrangement, as you may know. They didn't have little chairs with place settings, but rather they were all gathered around the table but they were on their sides with their heads toward the middle of the table. One person would lean back against the one next to them, and John was the one leaning on Jesus. That's why he was able to say during the middle of the Lord's Supper, Lord who is it, who's the one that's going to betray you? The others wouldn't necessarily have heard because he was so close. He had this intimate fellowship. He touched the Lord. The apostle Paul dealt with the same kinds of errors. Speaking of Jesus, in Colossians 1:13, he says

“He is the image of the invisible God,

Jesus makes the invisible God visible. He came and showed us himself what God is like because he took on a body that can be seen, a body that can be heard, felt, and so forth. God, Paul writes in Colossians 1:19-20,

For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him,
This was no accident. This was no rogue maneuver for Jesus to come to the earth, but it was the pleasure of the Father for all the fullness to dwell in Jesus. He really was fully God and took on human flesh

all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross;

Again, he had to be a man. He had to be a human so that he could die so that he could shed his blood so that he could redeem us. Others were coming into the church and saying, well, this is all good but there's more. You can attain a higher level of spirituality. You just need to be initiated into the secret things, and if you'll come with us, we'll teach you the secret things that will take you to a higher plane of understanding. Paul was starting to see this come into the churches. John was seeing this come into the churches, this idea of secret knowledge based on the Greek word *gnósis*. Some of these people were saying we've got something more, something beyond Christ. Paul said in Colossians chapter 2

there's the full assurance of understanding, *resulting* in a true knowledge of God's mystery, *that is*, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

You don't have to go looking somewhere else. Everything is in Christ. I say this, Paul says,

so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument.

Later in the letter, verse 8

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority"

All of God, in a way we can't understand, all of deity in the one God man, Christ Jesus, fully God, fully man, one person. There's no need to look anywhere. All that we could hope for is in Christ. He really came, and he was not ashamed to take on a human body. He created us and the world and everything in it, and he declared, "It is good." You remember at the end, after the crowning touch of the woman, the final pinnacle of

creation, "It is very good." There's no shame, there's no reason to be repulsed, by the idea of God taking on a human body. He did it for us, and it is good.

The dualists, those who believed in this distinction between the immaterial world and the material world, they claimed that a good God would never allow himself to be polluted by coming into contact with the material world. But God loved us. He loved his creation and sought to redeem humans. It was us. It was not the angels. It was us that he chose to redeem and was real. Our faith is grounded in eyewitness testimony to the truthfulness of the incarnation. Secondly, how this came to be. Notice in verse 2

and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us –

Now, this little verb "manifested" is not one that is necessarily in our everyday vocabulary. I think one of the first times I ran across this word just in everyday life was the idea of a shipping manifest because the manifest would say here's what's really in the truck. It's really here; it's physically here. That helps us, I think, a bit that the Word of Life is not just a cloud floating. No, the Word of Life was manifested, really here, physically here. The Word of Life came to us, the Lord Jesus, the one who was with the Father. I think of John 17 and the Lord's High Priestly Prayer. He said,

This is eternal life, that they

Those coming to faith.

may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

That's the ever-widening circle of fellowship and partnership, and Jesus continues in his prayer.

I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.

John says, "This eternal life," the Lord Jesus was with the Father. Jesus' testimony as well, "I was with the Father." That glory will be revealed, will be evident once again. It "was manifested" to us, John says. In the very familiar words of John's gospel, closely related writing, he says

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God

Then hopping down to verse 14

...And the Word became flesh,

Maybe we would more technically properly say the words “took on flesh.” It wasn’t a change from one thing to another but an addition. The word, the eternal God took on human flesh

and dwelt among us,

John says

we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

God himself came to us in person. That’s how John can say I have this testimony because God actually came in person. He physically arrived. That’s how it is that I have this testimony he’s telling us. But it wasn’t just, wow, that was a cool experience; I might write a book about that, make some money, do a lecture series. No, I want other people to know about this. We didn’t just keep this to ourselves. Notice in verse 3

what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also,

We’re saying this to everyone.

so that

Here’s an important clause, something to look for in the scriptures. When you see this little phrase “so that” in Greek *hina*, then you know ooh this is important. It’s like there’s a little arrow drawn, like get ready here’s the purpose. Here’s why. And notice that John says

what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.

John is saying here what was manifested is what we have seen. What we have heard is what we now proclaim. This idea of fellowship may need a bit of explanation. I grew up in a church that had a fellowship hall in the basement and maybe you did too. It was almost like, well, fellowship happens down there. That’s the place where fellowship occurs. Actually, like so many words in the New Testament, this came from the language and culture of the day. It wasn’t a church word, and what it meant was “partnership.” It’s more than we like to be together and have cookies and, you know, that’s nice but there’s something deeper. We are partners together in the gospel.

That’s one reason I’m so thrilled to have Serge and Martin come with me to Wayside Cross, and by the way, I think they were both at their best on Friday night. We are in partnership with the gospel, and as a church, we’re working together. I’m so glad for everyone who plays a role and helps me. Yesterday, Liz had this marvelous insight in Greek class that helped put things together. It was fascinating that some of these really intellectual commentary authors just kind of missed the point. We’re working together,

we're partnering together, in the gospel. It's such a marvelous thing. I could not do maybe 3% of what I do without my partner, my fellowship mate, my wife. She has such a great impact on this ministry, but we are working together. We are partnering together. That helps us think of this idea of fellowship in a broader, in a deeper sort of way.

John is saying, again, the reason I'm talking about this all the time is I want you to be included. See, the distinction was the gnostic, the one who said we've got this secret knowledge, it's only for our initiates; maybe we'll let you in and maybe we won't. John is saying no, this is for everybody. I want everybody to join in this partnership that we have, and it's not just our club, we're working together with God to accomplish his will. That is the reward of what we are doing. We proclaim our faith openly because it is open to scrutiny and examination. There's nothing secret here. We want people to ask questions, to study. Finally, John says, we want you to share our joy. Notice in verse 4

These things we write,

Up to this point, he's talked about his testimony, the things we have seen, the things we have heard, the things we've touched. But now, he says this is why we're writing it down. I think he had a sense that the Lord wanted to use his testimony long term, long beyond his life, and so it was important to write it down.

These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

There's a nerdy sort of question. Is this our joy or your joy? And the difference is one letter in the Greek text, and there are good arguments that can be made both ways. Like we, John speaking, will be joyful as we share this message because we know we're doing God's will, we're partnering with God, and communicating the gospel. Your joy will be complete, a good case for that because as you come to embrace the truth about Christ you will be redeemed, taken out of the domain of darkness and into the kingdom of his beloved Son; that's a joyful thing. What I learned yesterday was, ooh, we can have another marvelous both-and because the "our joy" is an all-inclusive our joy. The joy of all of us may be made complete. That's why we're doing this. That's why we're sharing the truth. It's a collective joy, an all-inclusive ever-widening circle of fellowship and partnership in the truth.

Yesterday, I was at my desk. You may know I have this little saying about joy that I have on my wall. I noticed that, and I thought, well, John is talking about joy. I remembered I put together some thoughts about joy when we were going through the Gospel of John. I thought, you know, maybe this is helpful and appropriate. In your bulletin, stuffed in there somewhere, is a little piece of paper that talks about joy. I just want to briefly walk through this and think about it in terms of what John is saying in 1 John 1:1-4. It's a little clunky, I acknowledge, but I think there are some good truths here.

Joy is an enduring gladness. It's not just a happiness that's based on what's happening right at this minute but an enduring gladness. Why are you so glad? Because of God's sovereign work in the world, and I have an unwavering confidence that he will fulfill all his promises.

Well, that's enough to give you a sense of joy and abiding, enduring gladness. Then that's coupled with a settled assurance that I'm working together with God for his purposes. This is the idea of partnership. *Koinónia* is the Greek term, fellowship, partnership. I'm working together with God for his purposes. That's a source of joy. What does that look like? Taking pleasure in seeing others embrace the truth of the gospel and grow in their understanding of his will.

I think that's much like what John is saying here. We've written these things. We're writing these things so that the collective joy of us all may be complete as we all are trusting in the Lord, rejoicing in what he is doing in the world, leaning on his promises, taking comfort and assurance from that. And then in awe, as we should be, of the fact that he's called us into fellowship, into partnership with himself that we may accomplish his will.

Many years ago, I worked for a big public accounting firm. I thought I was hot stuff, but the Lord was gracious to humble me. Anyway, the carrot that they held out in front of everyone was at some point you could be invited to be a partner in the firm, and by the way, those partners are raking in the dough. I mean, they are really rich. A lot of guys were working, working, working trying to get to that carrot at the end of the stick to join the partnership, to be invited to be a partner. Wow, that would be the thing. But we have an invitation from the God of the universe, the creator, to be his partner. Is that something else! Far beyond what we could ask or think. We have fellowship. We have partnership with our God to accomplish his will.

We know that we are in partnership with God when we share his joy in others coming into true fellowship with himself and with us. The apostles, of course John perhaps preeminent in this letter, gave their lives to testify about the reality of God taking on a human body and the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our faith, in their words, their testimony, enables us to share in the joy of their fellowship through the ever-widening circle of that eternal divine partnership of which we are now a part through Christ. Please pray with me.

Father, we thank you that you have graciously called us into fellowship with yourself, that we may be partners with you. Not that we have anything to offer, but it is simply by your grace that you have called us, you have equipped us, you have given us your mercy that we may simply testify of what we have seen, what we have heard, how you have touched us. Help us to be faithful stewards of the truth of the gospel, proclaiming it widely that our joy may increase as the

circle of fellowship and partnership is ever growing. To your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.