

Experiencing *the Word of Life*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Deut. 4:1–4, 1 Cor. 15:4–8,
1 John 1:1–5, Rev. 19:13.

Memory Text: “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” (1 John 1:3, NIV).

In court a man stands charged with murder. He swears, vociferously, that he is innocent, that he didn't do it, and that he wasn't even at the scene when the crime occurred. He sounds very convincing too. From his words alone, one could be tempted to believe him.

Then, however, witnesses appear. One after another, the eyewitnesses say the same thing: They saw the accused at the scene of the crime, and they saw him (and even in some cases heard him) commit the crime. Though individual details differ, depending on where they were at the time of the incident, their eyewitness accounts are overwhelming, and the man's guilt becomes obvious.

In a similar way John introduces his first letter by claiming that he belongs to the circle of eyewitnesses who, having seen and personally experienced Jesus, are able to share this life-transforming information with others.

The Week at a Glance: Why is Jesus the “Word of life”? What does John hope to accomplish by writing this introduction? How can we, even today, be eyewitnesses to Jesus? What role does community have in the life of a Christian?

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 11.

The Introduction to John's First Letter (*1 John 1:1–4*)

Read 1 John 1:1–4. What is John saying to us with those words? What hope can you take from them for yourself? Also, why do you believe him?

John begins by pointing out that he, together with others, is an eyewitness of “the Word of life.” Verse 2 further explains this “life,” and together with the first part of verse 3 stresses its proclamation.

What two things does John say will come as a result of his declaration about “the Word of life”?

In verses 1 and 3, John makes seven statements before he finishes the sentence: (1) What was from the beginning, (2) what we have heard, (3) what we have seen, (4) what we have looked at, (5) what we have touched, (6) what we have seen, and (7) what we have heard. Then he ends: “We proclaim to you . . . , so that you also may have fellowship” (*vs. 3, NIV*). In verse 2, which is an insertion and clarification, a fourfold enumeration ends with the phrase “and we proclaim to you the eternal life” (*NIV*).

The point in all this seems to be that John wants us to know, for ourselves, the reality of God that he himself had experienced through Jesus. He wants us to know, for ourselves, the eternal life, the fellowship, and the joy that we can have through Jesus, the same Jesus he himself had heard, seen, and touched.

What is your own understanding, and experience, of what it means to have “joy” in the Lord? Have you ever known any Christian who is always joyous? How do we understand the promises of joy when so often, even as Christians, our lives are filled with pain and suffering?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** 1 John 1:1–4

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that fellowship with Jesus results in true joy.

Feel: Experience the joy of fellowship.

Do: Share our life-transforming joy with others.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: Fellowship With God

- Ⓐ In 1 John 1:3, John refers to Jesus' humanity and divinity. What does this reveal about God? How does this open up opportunities for fellowship with God?
- Ⓑ In His humanity, Jesus suffered and experienced pain, yet John says that through Him we can have fullness of joy. How would you define this joy?
- Ⓒ John expresses the joys of fellowship with God and fellow believers. What role does fellowship play in the individual Christian's life?

II. Feel: Complete Joy

- Ⓐ What is the difference between experiencing the happiness and joy that come from fellowship with God and the joy and happiness that come from other sources?
- Ⓑ What role does fellowship with one another play in nurturing joy?

III. Do: Being Transformed by Joy

- Ⓐ Ask the group to share some occasions in which they experienced true joy. What can we learn from these experiences? How can we apply these lessons to help us share joy on other occasions?
- Ⓑ What ways can the Sabbath School group nurture fellowship? Encourage everyone to determine to do one thing to nurture fellowship with God and in their community in the coming week.

► **Summary:** John's personal experience of joy and fellowship with Jesus is contagious. He opens our eyes to the possibilities of experiencing complete joy today.

First John 1 and John 1

Those who know the Gospel of John are intrigued when they begin reading the first letter of John and find an introduction similar to the introduction of John's Gospel.

Read 1 John 1:1–5 and compare it to John 1:1–5. What are some things that they have in common?

Both passages begin almost identically. Both point back to a time in the past, using “the beginning,” an apparent reference to Genesis 1:1, the Creation. Both distinguish between God the Father and the Word, and both place them next to each other in close connection. Both sections also use the image of “life” and “light.” No question, there’s much in common between the two sections.

But there are also differences, as well.

What emphases do we find in John 1:1–5 that are not seen in 1 John 1:1–5?

John’s Gospel strongly stresses Jesus as God and Jesus as Creator. Although the full title “his Son, Jesus Christ” (*NIV*) in 1 John 1:3 points to both Jesus’ humanity and His divinity, the term *God* is not directly applied to Jesus in the introduction to 1 John as it is in the introduction to John’s Gospel. The Gospel of John is also very clear regarding Jesus in His role as Creator. Nothing that was made—that is, nothing created—was created apart from Him. It’s hard to see how John could have been more clear, not only about Christ’s divinity but His creatorship, as well.

Also, 1 John emphasizes the role of eyewitnesses and their proclamation (and, hence, their authority), an emphasis not found in John’s Gospel, which speaks from a more detached and less “personal” perspective.

Taken together, both sections reveal truths about Jesus that are central to the plan of salvation.

Think about all you know about the life of Jesus. What were the things He did, said, and suffered? Also, ask yourself, Why did He do these things? As you do so, dwell on the fact that this Man was also God, the Creator. What hope and encouragement do these truths offer you? How can they help you cope with the stresses and strains of life?

Learning Cycle

► STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: We cannot be direct eyewitnesses to the events of Christ's life, but that does not mean we cannot be eyewitnesses to the reality of Christ and what He has done for us.

Just for Teachers: Remember to keep your focus Christ-centered as you approach the study of the first epistle with your class members.

Martin Luther described 1 John as an “outstanding epistle. It can buoy up afflicted hearts. . . . So beautifully and gently does it picture Christ to us.”—*Luther’s Works: The Catholic Epistles* (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1967), vol. 30, p. 219.

It no doubt would have gratified John to know that fifteen hundred years after he wrote his epistle, its power to portray Christ to others had lost none of its potency. John wanted us to know for ourselves the eternal life, fellowship, and joy we can have through Jesus, the same Jesus that John himself had heard, seen, and touched.

Discuss: How have you personally known, touched, and seen Jesus?

If your life is a canvas, what portrait of Him does your life paint to others? How can you let Him make you His masterpiece?

► STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Christ is fully God and fully Man, and upon this truth hinges the entire plan of salvation and the Christian fellowship. Emphasize for your class members that the opening of the first epistle gives us no room for misunderstanding on this score.

Bible Commentary

The most dangerous heresy that invaded the church during John's time is the one that denied Christ's humanity. The Gnostic heretics argued that since matter is evil, God could not have taken a material body. Such a blatant denial of the incarnation of Jesus may have sounded logical to Greek ears but raised alarm in the aging apostle. So, the apostle begins his epistle, as he

C O N T I N U E D 

The Word of Life (*1 John 1:1, 2*)

What do you think the phrase “Word of life” means? Why is that such an accurate term for Jesus?

First John 1:1 mentions the “Word of life.” The term *word* also is found in John 1:1–3 and refers specifically to Jesus. In Revelation 19 the rider on the white horse is called “The Word of God” (*Rev. 19:13*) and refers to Jesus too. Because in the Johannine literature the term *word* may in certain contexts designate Jesus, in 1 John 1:1 it most likely stands for Jesus, as well.

The same is true for the term *life*. Jesus called Himself “the way, the truth, and the life” (*John 14:6*). Thus, the *life* in 1 John 1:2 surely refers to Christ, as well. No wonder, then, He is the “Word of life.”

What other evidence from those verses shows that John was referring to Jesus when He used the phrase “Word of life”?

Though some people have argued that the phrase “Word of life” means the proclamation of the gospel, the evidence points instead to Jesus Himself. Although it is possible to hear the gospel of Jesus with one’s ears, it is more difficult to see it with the eyes. Meanwhile, it is impossible to touch with one’s hands “the Word of life,” if that phrase were referring to the gospel proclamation. To hear, see, and touch a person makes more sense than to hear, see, and touch the gospel. Furthermore, the phrase “the . . . life . . . was with the Father and has appeared to us” (*1 John 1:2, NIV*) also suggests that John had a person in mind when he mentioned the Word and the life.

If we accept that Jesus is the “Word of life,” what does that mean for us? Look at each part of the phrase, “Word of life.” How do the following texts help us better understand what this phrase means in and of itself, and more important, what it means to us personally? *Gen. 1:14, Dan. 5:23, Matt. 8:8, John 1:1–4, Acts 17:28.*

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did his Gospel, with an affirmation that Christ Jesus is neither an illusion of mind nor an accident of history. He is God. He is God who came in flesh. As an eyewitness to the greatest miracle in history, John chose to affirm the uniqueness of the Son of God.

I. Christ Is God (*Review 1 John 1:1 with the class.*)

First John 1 begins with a bold assertion: “That which was from the beginning . . . the Word of life.” The words echo John 1:1–3, 14, which declare the divinity of the Word and His journey to human life through Jesus of Nazareth. The phrase “the beginning” does not mean that Jesus the Word had a beginning. The Word “was God,” and “with God” (*John 1:1*), and as such cannot have a beginning in terms of origin in time. There never was a time when He was not.

Jesus is not only the Word but also the Word of Life. By positioning “Word” and “Life” together, the apostle is making a significant point: the Word, Jesus, is also the Author and Restorer of life. In and through Him is eternal life (*John 3:16*). “In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, undeserved.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 530. And “He who has the Son has life” (*1 John 5:12*).

Discuss: Why is Jesus’ divinity so central to the plan of redemption?

Consider This: The “Word” in the Gospel clearly refers to Jesus (*John 1:14*). Why can you be sure that the phrase the “Word of life” in the epistle also refers to Jesus?

II. Christ Is God in Human Flesh (*Review 1 John 1:2 with the class.*)

The Eternal Word, the Second Person of the Godhead, “was made manifest” (*1 John 1:2, RSV*) in human flesh “and dwelt among us” (*John 1:14*). Thus, Jesus is not a myth or just a great man but a manifestation of God in human flesh. Christ’s humanity is as real as His divinity. This may be a divine mystery but never an illusion (*1 Tim. 3:16*). Without God’s Son coming in the flesh and dying for our sins, God could not have saved humanity from sin and death (*John 3:16, Rom. 6:23, Heb. 2:9, 1 John 1:7, 2:2*). Thus, Incarnation in its entire process from Bethlehem through Calvary, and Resurrection are indispensable parts of God’s preordained plan of redemption (*Eph. 1:3–7*). To deny the reality of the Incarnation is to become a spokesperson for Satan (*1 John 4:1–3*).

C O N T I N U E D 

Eyewitnesses

Many people like to go to a soccer game, a concert, a political meeting, whatever. They want to see for themselves what is going on and want to experience the event for themselves. Afterward they are able to share what they have seen and heard. Others are involuntary eyewitnesses, for instance, of an accident or a crime and may be called to witness in court.

The apostles were eyewitnesses of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. This "Christ event" influenced them to such an extent that they could not refrain from communicating it to others.

This is what we have with John. In 1 John 1:1–4, John claims to have been an eyewitness to Jesus. He buttresses his claims by saying that he not only saw Jesus but touched Him and heard Him, as well. John repeats those claims in the verses, trying to emphasize the reality of his personal experience with Jesus.

John isn't the only biblical writer to make some powerful claims about eyewitness events. What do the following verses have in common with 1 John 1:1–3? Who is speaking, and what was the background for their claims?

Deut. 4:1–9 _____

Acts 4:20 _____

I Cor. 15:4–8 _____

Today we cannot be direct eyewitnesses, at least not to the events of Jesus' life or to the historical events of biblical history. But that doesn't mean we still can't be eyewitnesses to the reality of Christ and what He has done for us. In some ways, especially in a postmodern world, our own personal story, our own personal "eyewitness" account, can be a more powerful witness to the reality and goodness of God than can the historical events depicted in the Bible.

What is your own "eyewitness" account of Jesus? Write it up and bring it to class.

Learning Cycle C O N T I N U E D

Discuss: Why would it have been impossible for God to save us if Jesus had not come in human flesh?

III. Christ We Have Seen (*Review John 1:14 with the class.*)

How can John be so sure of the deity and humanity of Christ? The apostle's authority is based on eyewitness and personal experience. John appeals to four aspects of this witness (*1 John 1:1*). We have "heard." We have "seen." We have "looked upon." We have "handled." The apostle has heard Jesus speak, and what Jesus spoke was the word of life from the Father. The apostle has seen what Jesus did. What He saw and heard was no ordinary human, but the One who was sent by God. He "was full of grace and truth," and "we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father" (*John 1:14, NKJV*).

Not only has John heard and seen, he also has looked upon Jesus. What is the difference between "seen" and "looked" upon? The Greek term for "to look upon," from the word *theaomai*, says more than *horan*, "to see." *Theaomai* is no ordinary seeing; it is an intense, involved, reflective, thoughtful experience to discover the inmost meaning of a thing or a person. After such a search John has found that Jesus is the eternal Word of Life who established fellowship with God (vss. 3, 4).

To the act of hearing, seeing, and intensely experiencing Jesus, John adds another powerful reference: we have "touched" Him. The mention is no doubt to what the risen Jesus said: "Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see!" (*Luke 24:39, NKJV*). The Incarnate Jesus is as real as the risen Jesus. Christian faith is no fairy tale.

Discuss: Unlike John, we have not "looked upon" Jesus in the flesh. But how do we see Him, touch Him, hear His voice, and experience Him today?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Take a few moments to let your class members share with each other what principles they were able to find in this lesson and how they can practice those principles.

Thought Questions:

- ① "We have seen, and bear witness," says John (*1 John 1:2, NKJV*).

C O N T I N U E D

Fellowship of the Saints

Someone has stated that God has no grandchildren, only children. A Christian experience is not a hereditary experience. We need to make a decision, in our own hearts, to give ourselves to Jesus. Someone else can no more do that for us than someone else can sneeze for us. We have to make the choice ourselves, and it has to be a complete surrender to Him. In this sense, being a Christian is a very personal and solitary experience.

At the same time, in those first few verses John adds another dimension to what it means to be a Christian. John invites us to accept his testimony about Jesus and thereby experience fellowship with Jesus and other Christians. In other words, the proclamation of Jesus is community building. To accept Jesus as Savior and Lord, as Giver of eternal life, means to be added to the family of believers.

According to 1 John 1:3, what are the dimensions of this fellowship?

Jesus Himself has established His community or church (*Matt. 16:18*), and He cares for it the way a shepherd would care for a flock (*John 10:14–16*). Jesus and His church belong together. The proclamation of Jesus and the gospel bring people into fellowship not only with the Father and the Son but also with other believers. There is not only an unseen heavenly connection but also a very real visible connection among these believers. Christians are blessed by the fact that they do not have to master their lives alone and in isolation from others but have become part of Christ's community and family on earth.

How is this Christian fellowship in its ideal form portrayed in the New Testament? See *Acts 2:42–47, Rom. 12:3–17*.

Our passage in 1 John ends with verse 4. John's goal is not only that people enjoy fellowship with God and with believers but also that they have their joy completed.

Verse 4 is, perhaps, looking back at the preceding verses. Our joy is complete because Jesus, "that eternal life," has appeared. The verse also may look forward to the rest of John's first epistle, in which Jesus and salvation through Him, as well as a life with God (which is a life of love), are unfolded. It finally may envision the future appearance of our Lord. Thus, 1 John 1:1–4 could encompass the time from the pre-existent Christ to the final consummation at Christ's second coming.

What has been your own experience regarding Christian fellowship? What can you do differently? How can you better enjoy, and help others enjoy, the community of fellowship that's our privilege as Christians to have?

Learning Cycle C O N T I N U E D

Experiencing Jesus precedes proclaiming Him. How have you experienced Jesus personally? How do you know Him as God, as Man?

- 2** Each of us who comes to Christ has a testimony to share. If you were to share yours with someone, what would you say?

For Reflection: “Each day is a journey, and the journey itself home,” wrote the poet Matsuo Basho at the beginning of his masterpiece, a travel journal, *Oku no Hosomichi*, or *The Narrow Road to a Far Province* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Inc., 1974). Basho’s words remind us, as Christians, that we are sojourners or pilgrims on this earth and that the places we call home are only temporary rest stops on the way to our heavenly destination. For many, the spiritual journey that brings us closer to Jesus makes us feel as though we’ve tasted a little of the beauty of heaven along the way. More than three hundred years ago, Basho, too, wanted to taste the beauty beyond his earthly home. He set out on a pilgrimage over his homeland of Japan with only a simple backpack, his writing materials, and some clothing on a five-month journey. As he traveled, he witnessed the beauty of the world around him, recording what he saw and felt so that others could experience its beauty.

John, likewise, wanted his readers to experience the beauty that he had seen, touched, and heard in Jesus. John’s epistles also record a journey along a narrow road, one that Jesus paved for us with blood from Calvary. On this road, Jesus pointed the way to a Far Province, which, unlike Basho’s, is not earthly but heavenly. John wrote his epistles as a guidebook for those who follow after Jesus.

Consider This: Basho extolled the moon views he saw again and again in his travels, which inspired some of the most beautiful haiku poetry ever written. Like Basho, John, too, has an obsession: Christ’s love. How does John present that love in a way that invites us to experience the reality of it for ourselves?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The lesson this week connects Jesus, eternal life, fellowship, and fullness of joy. Encourage class members to share how they have experienced this link in their lives.

Activity: You don’t need to be a haiku master like Basho to write haiku. Haiku are short poems of only three lines. The first line has five syllables, the second line has seven, and the third line has five. Try writing your own spiritual haiku that reveals something of your experience with God or your appreciation of His love or His powers as Creator.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Peace, Be Still,” p. 340, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“John, who has personally known Christ, desires to share his knowledge with his readers in order that they may enjoy the same fellowship he is already enjoying with the Father and the Son. In the course of expressing this loving desire, he asserts the divinity, the eternity, and the incarnation—and consequent humanity—of the Son. This wondrous knowledge he conveys in simple but emphatic language so that readers, in his own day and in ours, may have no doubt concerning the foundation of the Christian faith and the nature and work of Jesus Christ.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 629.

Discussion Questions:

- ① As a class, go over together your own “eyewitness” accounts of Jesus. What did they have in common? In what ways did they differ? What can you learn from the experience of others that can help you better know the Lord? At the same time, what have you witnessed that, in sharing, could benefit others?
- ② What is it about eyewitness testimonies that can be so powerful? At the same time, why should we not believe every eyewitness account? After all, people do lie, or they simply don’t see things accurately. Have you ever thought you saw something, only to realize later that you were wrong? If so, share your experience with the class. At the same time, what is it about the eyewitness accounts depicted in the Bible that give them so much credibility? Do we believe that they’re true because they are in the Bible? Or are they in the Bible because they are true? Or is it both?
- ③ Go over this whole question of fellowship. Why is fellowship so important to all believers? What happens to those who tend to strike out on their own, apart from any body of Christ? At the same time, what potential dangers arise from being too dependent on others or on the church? How do we strike the right balance?
- ④ What can you do to help your local church be more receptive to the needs of its members, thus helping it fulfill some of the ideals of fellowship, as seen in aspects of the early church? In what areas can your church do better?