

Slide John – Who was he?

The Apostle John is known to us because of his proximity to Jesus Christ in the gospel accounts. What we know of John comes mainly through the Scriptures. He's one of the inner circle of three; Peter, James and John. John is a familiar figure in most of the scenes we read about in the Bible with Jesus and the other disciples. John was an outgoing and at times a volatile person; who like, many of us, matured in Christ over time. He was really a man needed for his time and is needed for our time. His writings are bold, direct and dogmatic. I don't think there is another New Testament writer that is as unbending and direct as John is. He is confident in his writing and knows what the Lord has directed him to say. He is committed to truth as given by the Holy Spirit. He is an exclusive preacher much needed in our very inclusive times. These are great days in the life of the church. However, these are also days when Christian thinking can be loose, the scriptures are viewed by some as simply a set of guidelines. The church has become accepting, tolerant, and inclusive, and because of this the church is uncertain and lacking in doctrinal clarity. Many churches have given themselves over to tolerance and are given to compromise to please society. This is a perfect time to hear from John. His gospel provides for us a powerful message of correction for a compromising, open-minded, permissive and liberal thinking church environment. He is the perfect writer to address the church today.

Let me present some background on John to give a foundation for our study. I will be giving information from both the scriptures and church tradition about John and will try to identify the sources to eliminate confusion. John the Apostle was the son of Zebedee and the younger brother of James. **Tradition** considers Salome (*Sal-o-may*) to be their mother. Salome is a variation of Shalem or Shalom meaning peace. Shalem was the earliest name for Jerusalem. Early church **tradition** states James and

John were the cousins of Jesus and their mother Salome was the younger sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. However, this is tradition and gathered from early church writings outside the scriptures. Zebedee and his sons were fishermen from the Sea of Galilee. James and John first were disciples of John the Baptist, which **tradition** says was their second cousin. Jesus called Peter and Andrew, and these two sons of Zebedee to follow Him. James and John both held prominent positions for not only being among the first of the disciples to be called but also because of their relationship to Jesus among the apostles. Jesus referred to this pair collectively as "Boanerges" (*bo-an-erg-es*) translated "sons of thunder"; so, yes, these were the two sons of Salome (*Sal-o-may*) whose name meant peace, ^(Mark 3:17) although their normal nature seemed to be one of calm and gentle manner, when their patience was pushed to its limits their anger became wild, fierce and thunderous causing them to speak out like an untamed storm. At one point John and his brother James wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan town for their rejection of Jesus, but Jesus rebuked them. ^(Luke 9:51-56) John survived his brother James by more than half a century after James became the second to die a martyr's death, the first being Stephen. In the Book of Acts we read about James death in 44 AD, **Slide** ¹"About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. ² He killed James the brother of John with the sword, ³ and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread." (Acts 12:1-3) **Blank**

The inner circle of the disciples - Peter, James and John were the only witnesses of the raising of Daughter of Jairus (*ee-ah-i-ros*) a ruler of the synagogue in Mark chapter 5. ^(Mark 5:37) These same three also witnessed the Transfiguration, ^(Matthew 17:1) and it was these three who witnessed the Agony in Gethsemane (*gheth-say-man-ay*) more closely than the other disciples did. ^(Matthew 26:27)

Jesus sent only John and Peter into the city to make the preparation for the final Passover meal or the Last Supper. [\(Luke 22:8\)](#) At the meal itself, the "disciple whom Jesus loved" sat next to Jesus and leaned onto his chest. **Tradition** identifies this disciple as John. [\(Jn. 13:23-25\)](#) After the arrest of Jesus, Peter and the "other disciple" who according to **tradition** was John, followed him into the palace of the high-priest. [\(John 18:15\)](#)

John alone among the Apostles remained near Jesus at the foot of the cross on Calvary alongside the women; following the instruction of Jesus from the Cross, John took Mary, the mother of Jesus, into his care. [\(John 19:25-27\)](#) After Jesus' Ascension and the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, John, together with Peter, took prominent roles in the founding and guidance of the new church movement. John was with Peter at the healing of the lame man in the Temple. [\(Acts 3:1\)](#) He and Peter were ministering together when they were arrested and thrown into prison. [\(Acts 4:3\)](#) He is also with Peter when they visited the newly converted believers in Samaria (*Sa-mar-e-a*), the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. [\(Acts 8:14\)](#)

There is no other information in the Bible concerning the duration of John's ministry in Judea. According to **tradition**, John and the other Apostles remained some 12 years in Judea, until the persecution of Herod Agrippa the 1st led to the scattering of the Apostles throughout the various provinces of the Roman Empire. [\(Acts 12:1-17\)](#)

Of the other New Testament writings, it is only from the three epistles of John and the Book of Revelation that anything further might be learned about John. From John's Gospel, epistles and Revelation we know that John was a personal eyewitness of the life and work of Jesus. The writer is John the Apostle, not some other John. ⁽¹ [John 1:1-5 & 4:14\)](#) John lived for a long time in Asia Minor, was thoroughly acquainted with the conditions existing in the various Christian communities there, and he had a position of authority recognized by all Christian communities as a leader of the

church. Moreover, the Book of Revelation says that its author was on the island of Patmos "for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus", when he was honored with the vision contained in Book of Revelation. ^(Rev. 1:9) The John who wrote the gospel is the same person who penned Revelation.

John the Apostle is a man for our time to confront the laxity in the church, the shallowness among the professed people of God and the lack of conviction about what is really true and what is not. John writes with simple words. He writes in clear certainties. He is firmly committed to establishing the absolute truth in the minds of his readers. I believe that our study of John's gospel will bring a new sense of certainty to all who hear and understand. If there's anything lacking in modern evangelical thinking, it is certainty of truth. If you are already certain, John's gospel will make you stronger in your certainty.

Now just a few interesting notes; John never identifies himself as the author in any of his writings; gospel of John, 1-2-3 John and Revelation. You don't find his name given as the author and that brings up the question: **Slide** How do we know John wrote them? The answer to the question can be given in several ways.

We know John wrote them, first of all, because that is the strong and consistent universal testimony of the early church. There were people in the early church who knew John and they knew what John wrote and they knew John wrote His gospel account, epistles and Revelation. The universal, strong and consistent testimony of John's authorship can be traced all the way back to those people who knew him. None of the gospels identify their authors for that matter. It appears that it was not until the gospels were put together as a set and sent out to the churches that each gospel was given a title to identify the author. The books that bear John's name in the title all have been universally attributed to John, the disciple of Jesus, Apostle of

the Lord, brother of James, the well-known person Jesus referred to as the disciple He loved. Also, John lived the longest of all apostles. He lived till almost the end of the first century, probably dying around the year 98 A.D. His life overlaps many who knew Jesus and the generation following the apostles. When there is a universal attributing of these writings to John, and that tradition goes all the way back to the Church Fathers, this gives a solid foundation to believe in his authorship. There is even one early church leader, writer and historian by the name of Papias who bridged the generation after John. He knew John personally and called John, **Slide** "A living and abiding voice for God." Papias lived from 60 to 130 AD. Papias also knew Polycarp. Who was Polycarp? Polycarp was born into a Christian family. He identified himself as a disciple of John the Apostle. Polycarp was appointed Bishop of Smyrna (*smear-nah*) in Asia Minor. Ignatius (*lg-na-tius*) of Antioch, on his way to Roman martyrdom in 116 A.D., wrote letters to Polycarp and to the church at Smyrna. Polycarp was arrested by civil authorities, who attempted to convince him to renounce his faith. When he refused, he was burned at the stake. The story of Polycarp's death is found in a letter from the church of Smyrna to one of the churches in Galatia and is the earliest record of Christian martyrdom outside the New Testament. **Blank**

The very fact that John doesn't name himself argues for his authorship. Since only a well-known, only a prominent, in fact, only an Apostle called by Christ and recognized by the church at-large would venture to write his gospel account and epistles that he intended would have divine authority, divine impact and not use his name. For an Apostle to write demanding submission and demanding obedience from his readers without identifying himself could only be done if he were in fact an Apostle and recognized by his readers as such. All historical evidence leads us to conclude that John's writing period came at the end of his life, that it was in the nineties of the first

century that John did his writing, including the Book of Revelation which is usually thought to have been given to John around the year 96 A.D. By that time, John is virtually the last man standing, the last remaining Apostle. When he writes it was unnecessary for him to identify himself, being the only Apostle left alive - everyone knew who he was.

It was also consistent with John not to refer to himself by name. He refers to himself by descriptive phrases. He refers to himself, for example, as the Apostle whom Jesus loved. He refers to himself as the one who reclined near Jesus at the Last Supper. He does this a number of times when wanting to identify his presence at events in the scriptures; he doesn't use his name but describes himself in other ways. There is a measure of humility in John doing this. Apparently he was a modest man in that regard. But I think even more than that, he described himself not just in humble ways, but in ways that portrayed this magnificent, overwhelming reality that he was an intimate and beloved companion of Jesus. Every opportunity that John had to make reference to himself - seems was an opportunity to celebrate his intimacy with Christ. So when you don't see his name in his writings, you are not surprised because you don't see the names of the other gospel writers either. Most students of the New Testament agree that John's gospel and his epistles were written around the same time. There are a number of reasons for that, not the least of which is very similar vocabulary which is consistent in all of John's writings and was language that had evolved since the death and resurrection of Christ. Also, both his gospel and epistles combat a single heresy that later became known as **Slide** Gnosticism (*näs-tä-si-zəm*). The seeds of Gnosticism were present during the time of Paul and John and eventually developed into a full blown heresy a century or so later. Let me take a moment to define Gnosticism.

Gnosticism may have had a significant role in the writing of the First Epistle of John as well as had some influence in John's gospel account. Gnosticism was a heresy in its infant stages during the years when the New Testament was written, and a number of books in the New Testament spend some time refuting Gnosticism or the teachings that led to Gnosticism in later years. An overview of Gnosticism can be helpful in understanding not only John and his epistles but other books in the New Testament as well.

Slide • "Gnosticism" comes from the Greek word "to know."

- The teachings of the Gnostics had a number of variations, but all had two major features in common:

Slide (1) Salvation was found through a higher, spiritual knowledge. Those who entered into this knowledge were considered "enlightened ones." Ordinary people, including Christians, did not have this knowledge. They had to seek it through mystical ways and higher planes of spiritualism.

Slide (2) Spirit and flesh were thought of as separate entities. Spirit was good, but flesh was bad. The spirit was untouched by fleshly influences, no matter what the flesh did. Therefore, the flesh could sin at will if it desired, and the spirit was unaffected. A Gnostic could live a very immoral lifestyle and still claim to be a spiritual person. **Blank**

Gnosticism was rooted in ancient Greek philosophy of Plato and others. When the church spread from Jerusalem to Greece, it inevitably encountered this philosophy. Gnostics did not see how a good God could have created an evil physical world, so they concocted a worldview that absolved God of any responsibility for this world by separating the spiritual world from the physical world.

Gnosticism is addressed both in the gospel of John and in his epistles. Even this then argues for common authorship confronting a common problem at a common time. I believe that both the gospel and the epistles were written in the latter part of the first century by John.

It is thought by some scholars that the gospel of John, his epistles and Revelation were written before 95 A.D., because in 95 A.D. there was this massive persecution of Christians by Domitian (*də-ˈmi-shən*), the Roman Emperor who ruled from 81 to 96 A.D. He ordered a massacre of believers in 95 A.D. These scholars believe John's writings were written before this time is because there is no reference to the 95 A.D. persecution and massacre. Emperor Domitian was assassinated in 96 A.D.

From 90 to 95 A.D. or so, John was in charge of the churches of Asia Minor or modern Turkey. John was probably an overseer of the church at Ephesus which had been founded by Paul. The church at Ephesus and other Asia Minor churches, known as the seven churches of Asia Minor, is to whom letters are written in the first section of Revelation. Although he was an old man at the time, we can assume he was still a fiery proclaimer of truth, he was still a preacher and a teacher and a pastor and a shepherd. It was for his preaching and teaching that he was taken prisoner and he was condemned to die in exile on an island out in the Mediterranean called Patmos. It was on Patmos around the year 96 A.D. in exile that he was given the vision of Revelation to encourage a very discouraged Apostle. We know he had reason to be discouraged, he was persecuted; he was put out of circulation and was exiled to the island of Patmos. But even more compelling in his discouragement was that the churches over which he had leadership were beginning to turn away from the truth. This is manifest in the seven letters to the churches in which two letters have a positive message to a church that is doing well, and five letters have a negative

message to compromising sin-riddled churches. So God gave John the Revelation to encourage him that there was a glorious future, even if the present time was tragic. Jerusalem had been destroyed in 70 A.D. The land of Israel had been massacred, 985 Jewish towns and villages had felt the slaughtering power of Rome. At this time things didn't look good for God's promises to Israel, things didn't look good for Christ's promises to the church, the church was in disarray and even after John's best efforts, the seeds of compromise and sin had found their way into the church and here he was in exile, out of commission and separated from the churches he so loved.

All of this writing then is crammed into a few years at the end of the first century. This last man standing, this last Apostle alive has a great burden to bear as he unfolds the truth of God as the Apostle to wrap up the writings of the New Testament. Now near the end of his life comes a flurry of divine writings to guide the church then and now. All those years that the other writers of the New Testament are penning God's instruction to the Church of Christ we don't hear much from John. Finally after all these years **Slide** John explodes with revelation from God. Truly as Papias who had said of John, "He was a living and abiding voice for God's truth." John was the last contributor to divine revelation. He was the last to add to the record that God wanted written to the Scriptures. **Blank**

Now before we look at John's gospel next week, God willing. Let me talk about what I think makes John tick and any pastor of God tick. This is the sermon following the introduction. There are two major realities in the spiritual realm, two inseparable, essential, irreplaceable realities that are most critical to all effective ministries. Those two realities are truth and love. At the end of the day those are the two most compelling realities in all ministries. The priority is the **Slide** truth, proclaimed in love. That is the balance, sound doctrine and the gracious the love of the Spirit. It is not

enough to have the love and the gentleness and the graciousness and leave out the truth. You have to have the truth. The ignorant and the deceived need the truth. It's not enough to love them, to leave them in error, leave them in shallowness and to teach half-truths to please men. It's not enough to come to people clothed in tolerant half-truths that are a poor substitute for genuine love. There must be the truth. It's not good when love is missing and the truth is just cold facts that are stifling and unattractive. Ministry must possess truth and love for that is the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Christ was the perfect image of truth and love in balance. If you're seeking to minister to someone, these are the two things you must seek first; to know the truth as God has revealed it, and to seek love as Christ loves.

The perfect example of truth administered in love, of course, is Jesus Christ. But John is also a marvelous example of this. He may be the best New Testament model to look at, although it is hard not to see Paul as at least John's equal. If you understand truth and love united together, you understand John. John was not always humble. Remember early in his life, Jesus called him a "son of thunder." He didn't manifest humility in the beginning of his calling by Jesus; he manifested a bold, self-promoting ambition. Along with his brother James, they asked their mother to go to Jesus and ask if John and James could sit on the right and left hand of Jesus in the Kingdom. At this early stage of ministry he was arrogant. He had a volatile personality. Jesus changed John, the Holy Spirit grew him in maturity – this is the process of sanctification that all believers travel in life.

John is the Apostle of love. In fact, his theology of love appears throughout his gospel. John writes in his gospel that God is a God of love, that God loved His Son, that God loves the world, that God is loved by Christ, that Christ loved His disciples,

Christ expects believers to love Him, Christ taught that we should love one another and that love is the fulfilling of the whole Law. Until the end of his life as the last Apostle to die at the end of the first century, John never tolerated deception, he never tolerated lies, he was always committed to the truth, he never tolerated sin and he loved Christ and those Christ entrusted to his care with a deep love.

I think that the most powerful advocate of truth, the most black and white Apostle had also to be the most powerful representation of love, or that truth would come across as harsh. Isn't it interesting that the most clear-cut, authoritative and absolute writer of the New Testament is known in history as the Apostle of love? Not a love that takes you down the road of tolerance, but a love that takes you down the road of truth, for telling the truth is the most loving thing anyone could ever do. John was a lover of the truth more than anything and he loved the truth and the God of the truth and the Christ who is truth incarnate so much that he would tell people lovingly the absolute truth. We are going to learn the truth in no uncertain terms from a man who is committed to it, but also with a heart of love.

Let me close in Prayer - Father, as we have just started this morning, we can already feel the anticipation mounting and building as we sit at the feet of this beloved, blessed, old man who picked up his quill and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote to believers to teach them truths that would give them full joy and holiness and assurance. Here we are, as have many generations since, sitting at the feet of that old man who was as far as humanly possible is the best illustration of truth and love in balance and we eagerly await his instruction, as well as the power of the Spirit of God to implement this truth in our lives. Grant to us the joy and the holiness and the security that this Gospel according to John is intended to bring, we say thank You in our Savior's name. Amen.