

## **“Christian Certainties”**

**1 John 1:1-4**

**June 8, 2014**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

We are beginning a summer study this morning on John’s first epistle. It’s always good to get an idea of the overall theme of a book before looking at the details, and John doesn’t leave us in the dark about what was in his mind as he wrote. As he did in the gospel of John, he tells his readers at the end about his purpose. **“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life”** (5:13). His purpose in writing his longer gospel was **“that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name”** (20:31). So John’s gospel was written to unbelievers to bring them to faith, and this letter we are looking at this summer was written to believers in order to bring them to a place of assurance of their salvation.

As the title of this sermon indicates, the dominant theme of this letter is Christian certainty. John’s language reflects this theme. He uses two different verbs that both mean to know or perceive something, and they are used a total of 40 times in these five short chapters. One of his favorite nouns is one that refers to confidence or boldness. John wants us to know some things with certainty. He makes two primary applications of this certain knowledge. First, he wants those who truly follow Christ to have a settled assurance about that. He wants the mists of doubt and uncertainty about one’s salvation to be cleared up in the case of those who know Jesus. But there is another side to this that he is also concerned with. He not only seeks to bring believers to an assurance of their salvation, he also wants to destroy the false assurance of those who think they are Christians but really aren’t. So he is in favor of certainty, but against false certainty.

Christian certainty is especially needful in our uncertain age. We live in an era when knowledge is more readily available than ever before. It is quite easy to know so much that you get paralyzed, never taking any action but always staying in the role of observer and critic. In his book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins talks about the hedgehog principle. A hedgehog is a small creature that is something of a cross between a porcupine and a small armadillo. Their most effective defense when threatened by a predator is to roll up into a small, tight ball with only their quills pointed outward. Collins’ book features a parable about the cunning fox, who is always planning new ways to catch the hedgehog. But whenever the hedgehog senses the danger from the fox, he employs his tried and true defense of rolling up into a ball. Collins uses this parable as an illustration of the importance of simplicity and certainty to cut through all the complexity and uncertainty of life. Great companies, he says,

are the ones who are guided by a few very simple concepts. They don't allow themselves to be sidelined by the fact of complexity. As Christians, we are called to be like the hedgehog in this. There is in fact a great deal of complexity in our world, and many things we do not understand. While there's nothing wrong with trying to understand these things, we must always go back to those things we know for certain. When you are confused about life, the need is to simplify by returning to those things you know for certain. Let me point out the three John mentions in our text, and do so in reverse order to his ordering of them.

## I. The Certainty of Joy

John is saying that he is writing in order **“that our joy may be complete.”** It's not entirely clear whether the text should say *our* joy or *your* joy. That first person plural pronoun that John has been using throughout this opening section refers to the apostles and their authority. But since John said in the previous verse that anyone who receives the proclamation about Jesus also shares in their fellowship, I think the NEB translation captures the meaning of verse 4 well when it says, “we write this in order that the joy of us all may be complete.” Here is a certainty. Complete joy is possible, and God wants us to have it. The pessimists and cynics have it all wrong. When life is as it should be, there is joy. Is joy part of your experience?

That brings up another question, doesn't it? What is meant by this complete joy? Since we live in a world where sin is still present, I think it safe to say that the complete joy John speaks of will not be realized until sin is removed from our lives and our environment. Though complete joy may not be experienced in this life, the Bible teaches throughout that real joy can be experienced now. What is this joy John is talking about? Is it different than happiness? In one of his sermons on 1 John, Martin Lloyd-Jones mentions three features of joy that help us understand this.

Lloyd-Jones says first that this joy is a state of complete satisfaction. What he means by that is that every part of us must be satisfied at the same time if we are to experience joy. It must extend to the mind, the emotions and the desires. You can't be joyful if only your mind is satisfied. You can't be joyful if it's only a feeling. It would be exhilarating to free fall out of an airplane, but not if your mind told you that you had no parachute and the ground was approaching at a rate that would give you only about another 45 seconds of life. There is no joy possible except the kind that extends to the whole person. One of the implications of this is that in order to experience biblical joy you have to pay attention not only to your mind, but also to your emotions and desires.

The second feature of this joy helps distinguish it from happiness. Lloyd-Jones says that this joy is “spirit of exultation.” In other words, joy is a much more intense version of happiness. It’s like happiness on steroids. Suppose, for example, that there is a forty-year old woman who has always wanted to be married but for a variety of reasons never has. She has learned to be happy in her singleness, even though she would still like to be married. There are, after all, some rewards of singleness. Your schedule, diet, bathroom use and decorating preferences, are all completely at your discretion and need not take anyone else into account. Then along comes Mr. Right, with whom she falls in love, and he with her. He proposes marriage and she accepts. Though she had learned to be happy in her singleness, she exults in this new relationship. That’s the difference between happiness and joy. As we grow in our knowledge and faith in Jesus, there is an element of exultation about it.

The third element of this joy is “that in joy there is always a feeling of power and of strength.” Lloyd-Jones is not talking here so much about our own power and strength. Rather, it is the feeling of power and strength we have in Christ. Have you ever been in a tall, modern, well-built building during a severe thunderstorm? You can stand at the window, with its thick, sturdy glass, knowing that it was built to withstand even much stronger storms. You can be inches from the raging storm outside and feel perfectly secure and safe. In an article about C. S. Lewis several years ago, Lewis scholar Alan Jacobs comments on what he regards as central to Lewis’ writings. He says that it is an openness to delight, “to the sense that there’s more to the world than meets the jaundiced eye, to the possibility that anything could happen to someone who’s ready to meet anything.” There is a certain joy in that feeling of power and strength, and it is the feeling of those who know Jesus.

All three of these elements of joy point us to another important fact about joy. You cannot make yourself joyful. In the Bible, joy is always produced by something else. That brings us to our next point.

## **II. The Certainty of Fellowship**

When John says that he is writing these things in order that our joy might be complete, he is referring to what he is writing in these first four verses. He has just brought up the topic of fellowship because John believed that joy comes from fellowship. He mentions two kinds of fellowship in verse 3. **“That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”** There is fellowship with one another and fellowship with God.

It's interesting here that John begins his letter by saying that the purpose of the proclamation of Christ is fellowship. He doesn't say that the purpose of gospel proclamation is salvation, which is the word we might expect to read here. The word salvation has in view what Jesus delivers us from. He saves us from the judgment of God, which our sins deserve. That is true, and that is glorious and joy-giving. But John is pointing us here to the more positive side of our salvation, what we are saved to. God's ultimate goal for us in sending Christ is fellowship, fellowship with one another and with God.

Fellowship is going to be a major theme of 1 John. It stems from the very essence of God, which John is going to speak of later when he says simply, **"God is love"** (4:8). Since we are his image-bearers, it is also our essence to love. A central feature of being human is to love, and we were created to love one another and to love God. One of the results of sin is that it causes us to live selfishly. But when we live selfishly, we are denying our essence, and that brings misery and death. Through Christ God has saved us from that and empowers us to love God and others. Now we can have true fellowship that brings joy. It is a fellowship free of barriers and one characterized by loving the same things.

There are two important applications of this verse about fellowship. First, there is no such thing in the Bible as following Christ apart from fellowship with other Christians. In other words, coming to Christ should always result in deep participation, deep fellowship within a church. That brings us to our second application of this. We are to labor to achieve this kind of deep fellowship within our church. This calls for more than superficial participation, and it calls for our efforts to make the church about more than superficial socializing. As John words it here, our fellowship is to be with one another and with the Father and the Son. That means that we should talk about God in our fellowship together. While it's okay to talk about sports, jobs, homes and children, we are called to deepen our fellowship to talk about God and what he is doing in our lives. Questions like "How can I be praying for you?" or "What's God been teaching you lately?" introduce the kinds of conversations we need to be having with one another if we are to begin entering into the kind of joy John speaks of here. But we are often like the newspaper editor I read about several years ago. In December of 1903 the Wright brothers were successful in getting their "flying machine" off the ground. Thrilled, they telegraphed this message to their sister Katherine: "We have actually flown 120 feet. Will be home for Christmas." Katherine hurried to the editor of the local newspaper and showed him the message. He glanced at it and said, "How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas." He totally missed the big news—man had flown! Don't we do the same when we content ourselves with trivialities in our speech with one another and never speak of the glories of Jesus?

### **III. The Certainty of the Word of Life**

Where does this fellowship come from that leads to the joy that we have been looking at? John had a certainty about this. He said that fellowship and joy come from **“the word of life.”** He goes on to explain that this word of life is the good news that came in the person of Jesus. He says that this word of life was present **“from the beginning,”** by which I take him to mean the beginning of time. In other words, Jesus was present before the beginning of time because he is God. But he became man, which John labors to demonstrate by saying that he and the other eye witnesses to his life, death and resurrection had seen him, looked upon him and touched him. He was countering an error that was present in this day that separated the divine Christ from the human Jesus and said that Jesus was just a regular man like any of us until the divine Christ descended upon him.

What does John do with Jesus? Twice he says that he proclaims Jesus. This is the great work of the church. About this we are to be certain. Jesus is the source of life, fellowship and joy. How would you respond if someone were to ask you, “What is your best proof of the existence of God?” Many would answer by pointing to some rational argument, others to some experience. John answers simply by pointing to Jesus and proclaiming him. At the end of the day, Christians resort to one simple, but dominant truth. Jesus has lived, died and been raised again to bring life to any who will come to him. There is no other path to fellowship and joy. That’s our hedgehog principle. Let’s join John by proclaiming this truth with certainty to a cynical, skeptical, lost world.

### **CONCLUSION:**

A preacher of the early 1900s said that when he was 12 years old he had killed one of the family geese by throwing a stone and hitting it squarely on the head. Figuring his parents wouldn’t notice that one of the 24 birds was missing, he buried the dead fowl. But that evening his sister called him aside and said, “I saw what you did. If you don’t offer to do the dishes tonight, I’ll tell Mother.” The next morning she gave him the same warning. All that day and the next the frightened boy felt bound to do the dishes. The following morning, however, he surprised his sister by telling her it was her turn. When she quietly reminded him of what she could do, he replied, “I’ve already told Mother, and she has forgiven me. Now you do the dishes. I’m free again!” In Jesus, we are free.