

John 1:1-5, 1 John 1:1-4

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Date: 20 December 2015

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[0 : 0 0] Well, if you've noticed, Christmas adverts are an interesting category of adverts, aren't they? In them, there is always snow, without fail, even though they usually film a cost of millions! of pounds in July, as much snow in July as there is this December, no matter, there are temperatures of excellent. No one has as much of a cold, let alone cancer, and every family is always deliriously happy, and all the presents are always perfect, especially if you bought them at John Lewis. That is the way it goes, isn't it? But these adverts, kind of ridiculous as we know they are, they tap into a deep desire, don't they? We desire a place called home, we desire a home which is happy and healthy, and where there is peace and joy, however unrealistic that is in this world. The trouble is, the way those Christmas adverts portray Christmas is it's all escapism, isn't it? It's all denial of reality and fleeing to a dreamland.

Rather than embracing the reality around us. But as John writes his letter, he is writing about reality. And in a sense, he's writing about coming home as well. He's writing about the fellowship, the relationship, the community, that we actually all long for and are created for. And he is writing about Christmas, in a sense, because he's writing about the incarnation.

He's writing about God becoming flesh and living among us. God living as a man. Now as we read these verses, in a sense, they're quite complex, aren't they? John doesn't even give us a verb until verse 3. But there's a beauty in them. He draws us in with a beauty. So before we dive in, let's try and get clear on a few things. What is John actually doing in these opening verses?

Well, he's proclaiming a message to us. Verse 3. He's proclaiming a message. He's passing on a message. What is that message about? Well, it's a message about life. In verse 1, he calls it the word of life. The message that bestows life. And this message is not an idea or a philosophy or a to-do list. It is a person. The message is a person. You see that in verse 2. We testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father. It's a person he is proclaiming. And what's his goal in proclaiming and writing this message?

Well, verse 3. It's so that you too may have fellowship with us. And indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. Now that word fellowship is a word we often cheapen, isn't it? Some churches talk about fellowship after the service. Having coffee or a biscuit at the back of church. That's important to have coffee and a biscuit with each other. But that's not the real meaning of fellowship. At the heart of that idea is having something in common. Having community in common. It's a word that's translated partnership elsewhere in the New Testament. Perhaps you get the idea if you've read or seen the Lord of the Rings. The first of those books, the first of the movies, being the fellowship of the ring. And what happened? You had brawls and hobbits and men brought together with a common goal, a common purpose. Sharing together to reach that goal. So that's something of what John is writing of here. Brought together into community. It's a relationship with a giving and receiving with one another. And that's the goal that he's writing for. That we might share in this community. Not only with John, but also in a community he enjoys with a father and his son. So that's his goal. What's his motivation? What's his motivation? Well, verse four he tells us, we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. He's writing it for joy. He says, at the moment my joy is not complete because the people I'm writing to may yet wander away, may yet be on the outside of this community. It might be helpful to picture it like this. John is gathered round a table, eating a beautiful feast, perhaps a Christmas dinner, in the presence of God the Father and his Son. And he's writing this, that his readers, including us, may come into that feast and enjoy it too. And not just stay on the outside.

[4 : 2 5] So the question for us as we read it is, how can we experience this fellowship? How can we partake of this joy? And the answer is, it's through believing, and through continuing to believe, this message that John has for us. And it's a message about life. About true life. About eternal life.

We're going to look at that message now. We're going to look at how John talks about the origins of this life. Verses one and two. The appearance of this life in history.

And finally, the ultimate experience of life in the present. So the origins of this life, the appearance of life in history, and the ultimate experience of this life in the present.

But what's the origins of this life? Sure, if we ask most people out on the streets, what's the origins of life? They'd confidently tell us it was a big bang 14 billion years ago. But life just came to exist about time, by time and chance. And we're just here the products of time and chance and randomness. Of course, that doesn't answer any questions about how could something impersonal, like time and chance, give rise to something personal, like us beings who have need for fellowship, need for community, need for love, who long to experience joy and peace.

Need something personal to create that, don't you? That's why John has a very different account of the beginning. He talks about that which was from the beginning, first one. He goes back before life was, to the one from whom life sprang, the one who created it all.

In the Gospel reading we had earlier, he talked about in the beginning was the Word, the Word of God, it's through the Word of God that everything came to exist. Here he talks about something similar, but slightly different.

[6 : 17] The emphasis is not on the Word, but the life that that Word was. In John's Gospel, in verse 5 of chapter 1, he talks about in the Word was light, and that light was the life of man.

And here he talks about a life. And that life was personal. He was with the Father in the beginning, he tells us in verse 2. And that's important. That shows us that our Creator is in fact personal. He has relationships within himself. His Father, Son, later on we find Spirit as well, in the beginning.

There was a fellowship, a community there. You know, personal.

Enjoying relationships with one another. And that explains why we are personal beings, why we are relational beings. We are created to enjoy in that fellowship.

That's the first thing. He tells us that God is personal. But also God is the source of life, and secondly. Not just biological life, but there is no true life without God the Creator, without Him who is with God in the beginning. A fish cannot have life without water. Whatever it thinks cannot be fulfilled if it tries to leave the water. We cannot be fulfilled in life. We cannot have true life without the Creator of God, the life that was there in the beginning.

And thirdly, John is telling us here, this life is transcendent. This God is transcendent. He is outside of time and space. He is bigger than our minds can grasp. He cannot be analyzed to test you. We cannot have experiments done on Him. We need Him to reveal Himself to us.

[7 : 54] He's not something we can work out. So how then can we know Him? How can we know this life has origins beyond eternity? Well, the answer is what John tells you secondly, as he talks about the appearance of this life in history. You see, that's John's great emphasis. Look at verse 2 for a moment. He says, this life was made manifest, and we have seen it. When something's made manifest, that means it appears, it becomes obvious to us. You might wonder why things are disappearing in your kitchen. You may not be able to explain it. And then that day you see the mouse scurrying away into its hole. Your problem has been made manifest.

It's become visible and apparent. There's a mouse stealing stuff from you. How do we know this life that was outside history? It has to be made manifest to us. It has to appear to us. It has become visible. That's what God is saying here. The invisible has become visible.

The intangible has become tangible. The transcendent has become tangible. And that happens in the incarnation, as the Lord Jesus Christ, as God the Eternal comes into the world as the Lord Jesus Christ at Christmas. God taking on human flesh. And there are two things about this incarnation, about this appearance of life in history, that John wants to emphasize.

The reality of it. The reality of it. The reality of it. The reality of it. So first of all, the reality of it. You see how John uses sensory language to highlight the reality of it. He uses three senses. His eyes have seen. Our ears have heard. Our hands have touched. As he mentions hands touching, he's recalling that incredible occasion when the Lord Jesus on the third day had risen from the dead and said, Luke 23, 49, touch me. Feel me. See, I have flesh. I'm not a ghost.

John's saying we touched him. We know he is life. This life came from heaven and lived among us, John said. We saw him. We touched him. We ate with him. We heard him. He is real. He has appeared in history. It's real. John's emphasizing the reality by saying it's not just my experience.

[10 : 13] It's not just what I thought I experienced one day. We have seen. We have heard. We have touched. In the Old Testament and throughout the Bible, all things have to be established on

the evidence of two or three witnesses. John's saying we have witnesses. We, the apostles, saw and felt and touched. So he isn't, as one writer put it, John isn't making polite conversation here. It's more like he's virtually swearing an oath in court, saying this is real. And part of the reason John is doing that, if you read on through this letter, you'll find there are some people at the time denying that God is telling human flesh. Now the reason of denying that is that part of the philosophy of the day was that God was spiritual and good and physical stuff was bad. And so God could never take on flesh. That was just a terrible idea.

And so John is emphasizing the reality of the incarnation. God had taken on flesh. It's funny, isn't it? The first heresy that Christianity had to deal with was not that Jesus wasn't really God, but it was the fact that God hadn't really become a man. That was the first heresy, that God had not really become human in the person of Jesus. Now we don't have quite the same challenge today. But we do have a similar thing, where people think that it's only what you can see and feel and touch. Only material stuff is real. It's only what can scientifically be demonstrated is real. Everything else is just values and opinion and ideas. But John says that's not the case. That's not the case. Life has come from outside our system. It's come from a realm we cannot see and feel or touch, but has revealed itself to us. And that is every bit as much real. Reality is just not what science can measure. We know that very experience, can't we? Because science can't measure beauty. Science can't determine morality. Yet we know those things exist. The scientific method can't measure beauty. It's only in validity. If someone says to you in a conversation, it's only what science proves that is true. Then you can say, is that true?

Yes, they might say it is true. Can you prove that then? Well no, you can't. You can't scientifically prove that you have to prove things to be true. It's circular logic, doesn't matter. And John is saying, God has stepped in to time and space. This is a reality we've seen and touched in.

We can't dismiss these things to just personal opinion. They are real. We can't relegate God to some sort of category of opinions and ideas and what we like and what we don't like. Because God has revealed himself. The eternal has stepped in to time and space. So John highlights first the reality of the incarnation. Then secondly the significance of the incarnation. He talks about the word of life. This message. This message and also this person. The eternal life that was with the Father. He's telling us this life that appeared in Jesus Christ. What is embodied in Jesus Christ? But also the message of this life, the ability to experience this life comes through Jesus. Jesus is the source of life and the example of true life. He is the source of life and he was there in the beginning. Enjoying life with the Father and with the Spirit. He is the source of life for those who believe. And through the incarnation, through this coming flesh, coming to live with us, he has done what is necessary to enable us to experience this life as well. And he comes with a message of how we can receive it. So he's the source of life. But he's also the example, the demonstration of what true life is. Of what true life actually is. See lots of people think they know what life is about, don't they? There's that old story I'm sure you've heard of it. A wealthy man who read about what the Pharaohs did, he decided it was a good idea. So he said, when I'm buried, I want to be buried with all my favourite possessions. And so the day came, he died, he was being buried in a big space, had to be dug out by the excavators. And a crowd gathered around.

At first they put his big Rolls Royce in. And then all his favourite works of art, carefully wrapped up so they wouldn't be decomposed. And then all his other favourite possessions, his dual reconnection, his beautiful hi-fi system, it's all going into this hole. And two men standing by the grave, watching these incredible possessions going in, turn to each other and say, wow, that's really living, isn't it? As an old story, it's a bad joke, but it makes the point, doesn't it? But our problem is we don't have life forever. Life ends.

[15 : 14] We try and fill life with so much stuff, but it doesn't work. When someone wants to come and show us what life is truly about, what life is truly like. As John said, he said, he's a person says, Jesus is the life who he saw and felt and touched. He's recalling all the teaching Jesus gave. How Jesus came and said, I've come that they might have life and have it in abundance. How Jesus said, I am the bread of life. There is no life without me. How Jesus said, I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, no one has life except through me. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the life that goes on besides death. Jesus came because he was sent. That's implied in verse 2 where John says that he was with the Father. He's then sent by the Father. Later on in this very letter, in chapter 4, verse 9, John will say, in this the love of God is made manifest among us. That God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him. John said this is the

message of life. Jesus is the source of life, an example of life. We have life through him. Jesus himself, praying that God would get so many before he was betrayed, said this is eternal life. That they may know you the only true God and Jesus Christ who you sent. This is life. Jesus was the example of it because he lived it out for us to see in glorious 3D. He's the source of it and he comes to offer it to us. How can he do that? He does it through his life and death. Through living the perfect life that we could not have lived. And in dying in our place. Those words of assurance we had earlier. He was the propitiation for our sins. He took on flesh so that in his flesh he could take the punishment that we as human beings deserve.

So that he could turn away God's righteous wrath. That's what propitiation means. It's turning away God's righteous anger against our sin. And in doing that he was doing what the Father wanted. The Father showed his love and sent him the Son to do that. Now what is it that stops us having true community, true deep relationships with one another? It's our selfishness, isn't it? We all love the idea of community. And yet when sacrifice comes we pull back. Jesus came to establish true community with God with one another. He did it through selflessness, didn't he? Through pouring out his own life for our sin and giving it on the cross for us. So John wants to see the significance of this. We can have life through Jesus. He wants us to know the reality of it. That Jesus came in flesh and blood. So that we could have this life through him. It's important to see then that this life is not just some kind of spiritual thing that is out there. It is a real life. It is a real life to be lived physically in our bodies now. Jesus was the embodiment of it. He didn't just become the source of life sort of later on. He didn't just become the source of life as he was teaching and doing miracles.

He always was the embodiment of life. He always was the embodiment of life. Life lived in a relationship with God. He was the embodiment of it as he was making tables in a carpenter's shop. He was the embodiment of it as he grew up learning, growing as every child has to. Because he always was this life. He had it from the very beginning as God incarnate. He said, this life is something we live out now. We can live out true life now in fellowship with God the Father and God the Son and God the Spirit. We live it out in our workplaces.

We can live it out in our families. We live it out in our schools. Yes, we come special on Sunday in corporate worship to have that faith sustained. I'll say more of that in a minute.

[19:32] This life is to be lived out physically now. Spiritual things are not of separate importance. It's not like being a minister is more important than being a doctor or a street cleaner. We can equally live our fellowship with God wherever we are. As carers, as children, as old people.

That fellowship of God is to be enjoyed. And that's why John is writing this, isn't it? Verse 3 or verse 4. We write these things so that our joy may be complete. In other words, having spoken about the origins of this life, having spoken about the appearance of this true life in history. Now John is urging us, wanting us to have the ultimate experience of life in the present. The ultimate experience of life in the present. People have all sorts of ideas about what the ultimate experience of life is, don't they? Back in July, the car manufacturer, a jeep, did a survey looking at what fulfilling life experiences are. And so they drew up this list of 39 fulfilling life experiences. Let me share with you some of them for your edification and hopefully amusement. In the top 10 you have things like surfing in Hawaii, traveling by a private jet. It's not much just pure adventure experiences. So doing a skydive, doing a bungee jump, joining an expedition across the Antarctic. These are all things that people believe will give them a fulfilled life. Unfortunately, only less than 20% of the people in this survey thought they had anything approaching a fulfilled life. And the reason they didn't, the reason so many of them didn't, was, you'll never guess this, they didn't have enough time or enough money. And even more revealing, over half the people in the survey, these 2,000 people, admitted that they were envious of others, feeling other people had a more fulfilling life. Now that's interesting, isn't it? Everyone feels that somebody else out there has something better. That someone else is having a greater experience. What could it be?

I actually learned a new acronym this week. A new acronym used in text messaging. Some of you probably know this. I'm showing up old age here. I suppose. I'm learning these things. F-O-M-O. F-O-M-O.

Phone number. You know what it is? Fear of missing out. Fear of missing out. Many people experience this. Apparently, the definition of it is a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent. Do you have F-O-M-O?

That fear of missing out. That fear that someone else is travelling across Antarctica or having a bungee jump, is having a great time in your not. So that reveals a longing in the human heart,

doesn't it? A longing for something greater. A longing for something fantastic.

[22 : 37] Well, John is writing this letter saying, don't have FOMO. Don't have a fear of missing out. Believe and come on. Make my joy complete by sharing in this ultimate experience of life which you are made for. John says there's no need to miss out. Vertical fellowship. Our fellowship, he says, verse 3, is with God the Father and with his Son. And that leads to horizontal experience to. You have fellowship with us. You have the community you long for. There's no need to miss out. And this is far better than those 39 experiences that the car company Jeep identified.

Far better in many ways. Let me just list three ways in which is particularly better. First all, this experience will not end. If you go for a bungee jump, good luck to you. It might be fun for the moment, but it's all over pretty quickly, isn't it? This experience of fellowship with God and with God's people will not end. Secondly, it's a shared experience, not a selfish, individualistic one. You can go for a bungee jump, but only you can experience it. Because we long to be connected to others, don't we? Through fellowship with God, which is available through Jesus Christ, we are connected to others. We are part of something bigger.

Part of something bigger. And thirdly, of course, it's free. It doesn't cost you all the time in the world. It doesn't cost all your money to save up for an Antarctic expedition. It is free. The price is being paid through Jesus Christ, who is the propitiation for our sins.

See, John is writing to urge his readers, and that includes us, to believe this message so we can have fellowship with John, with the Christians who have gone before us, and with God the Father and God the Son. And that leads to real joy. Real joy. As one commentator puts it, it translates into a certain buoyant affection for others, and prays for God, because of participation in forgiveness of sins, because of transformed lives, and because of the ennobling privilege of working in the kingdom. But maybe, with the stresses and strains of life, some of us are sitting here thinking, okay Stuart, that sounds great, but this doesn't feel like great joy to be a great joy to be a great joy to be a great joy to be a great joy to be now. Why? What can I do about that? And as one wise man said, none of us has less of God than we truly want. None of us has less of God than we truly want. This fellowship, this community with God the Father and God the Son comes through faith in Christ Jesus. So where we're feeling joyless, where we're struggling, the solution is not to go off and look for a different experience. The solution is to come in faith to receive what God gives us in Christ. How do we do that? That means using the tools, receiving from God the tools he's laid in our hands to strengthen our faith. He's using the means of grace, as they're called. He's coming Sunday by Sunday to worship God together with his people, to sit under his word. And so have our faith strengthened. It means receiving the sacraments, as we will do later on, as God uses the bread and the wine for those who trust in the Lord Jesus, to strengthen and nourish our communion with him, our fellowship with him. It means reading God's word, even on our own, praying on our own. These means of grace that God uses to strengthen and sustain our fellowship with him. And do you think, do I have to do these things? Have I got to do those things? Well, next Friday, next Christmas day, when I'm sitting around the table with my family, and we're actually roast beef this year rather than roast turkey. I'm glad to say it's, I prefer beef rather than turkey. I'm not going to sit there thinking, do I have to eat this? Do I have to be here? I get to be here. It's a privilege. And so it is for us, as we get to receive the Lord's Supper, as we get to gather for worship together. As we get to enjoy God's strengthening our faith, that we might enjoy our communion with him more. It's a privilege. It's not a task to endure.

[27 : 05] It's a privilege to endure. Remember what John's told us? He's told us about the origins of life. It comes from God the Son, who was there in the beginning. He's told us about the appearance of life in history. Jesus Christ came to show us what life is, and to enable us to experience life with him, and the ultimate experience of life. To know and enjoy God now, and therefore to know and enjoy him as his people together. So where can joy be found this Christmas?

Not in the merriness of the adverts, of pretending the world is great, of buying the right presents, of pretending it's going to be a white Christmas, but it's clearly not. Joy is found not in that escape from reality, but embracing the reality of the incarnation, of what God the Son came in flesh to give us. The Son of God left his home with the Father to make his home with us, so that we may find our true hope in community with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. That's where joy is. Let's pray.