



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

1 John 1:1-4

"Word of Life With the Father"

TRANSCRIPT

[Introduction of Dr. Johnson] I'd like to introduce a man who needs no introduction.

[Laughter] Well, we do have I guess many here attending the Chapel, members of the Chapel who maybe don't know who S. Lewis Johnson is. So I'd like to tell you. He has been a faithful member of Believers Chapel for one thing, from the very beginning, and was one of the founders of Believers Chapel. He served as elder here for many, many, many years and served as our teacher, as a pastor here, and is revered at Believers Chapel. We love Dr. Johnson. He has taught the Scriptures in an unparalleled way for many, many years; many decades [Laughter] and taught them well. He is a scholar, and he more than anything loves the Lord, loves his work, loves his people, loves his word, and has so graciously agreed to teach us again for the next three Wednesdays. So we've very glad to have Dr. Johnson with us, Dr. Johnson.

[Johnson Lecture] I've been asked to speak for three Wednesday nights. I must say that Dan said that if I wanted to do more I was welcome to do more, because they had some gaps somewhere. But it will be just three times. And I have looked forward to the opportunity to have a chance to expound the word with the congregation in which and among which I'm usually sitting on Wednesday nights. So I feel at home.

The subject that I wanted to undertake is a very simple one. What I would like to do is to just do three studies from 1 John with the general theme of what did the last of the apostles think of the Christianity that he had espoused and that he understood, that the other apostles had espoused and of course what he understood also that our Lord himself had espoused. It seems to me it would be very interesting to us to think of this as something that the last of the apostles has given us so that we might have an understanding, or at least some understanding of what they thinking about when the times changed from the 1st century to the 2nd century and the history of the church, as we know it especially, took on a new significance. So tonight I'd like to deal with a very simple subject, "The Word of Life With the Father," which is the title that I have put upon the first four verses of the first chapter. So if you have your Bibles open them to 1 John, remembering of course that the author is the last of the apostles, so far as we know, and therefore we do have from him some understanding of what the Christian church was at the time of the passing away of the apostles. The subject that I have is "The Word of Life With the Father."

A long time ago when I gave a message on this topic I began with a quotation from T.S. Elliot. And I'd like to cite it again. Elliot once cried out, "Where is the life that we have lost in living." Now that melancholy cry John answers by point us to the Word of Life with whom and his Father we may have fundamentally vital fellowship. Most of us, when we think about the important men of the day, imagine ourselves in conversations with some of them, wondering about how we would carry on a conversation with some of the important men of the day. So if you as one of the apostles had been listening to the Apostle John you might have wondered what he might say as he was passing off the scene. Well we have words from him, and the words are found in First and Second and Third John. Very interesting epistles, of course, most of you have read them and studied them, no doubt, and they are extremely important, because they do let us know something significant about the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A few words by way of introduction, the purpose of 1 John is twofold, it is first polemical, that is it was a counter influence of Cerinthian Gnosticism. Cerinthus was a heretic who lived in Ephesus, and that's where John lived. And in fact they may have well have known each other. And so what he said and what John said were somewhat parallel. There is some interest. There is a story about Cerinthus and the Apostle John. As you know in those days when you took a bath you didn't go into the bathroom and shut the door, but you went to the public baths. Well, there is according to Eusebius a story to the effect that Polycarp at the time that Polycarp was living, at the time of the Apostle John, that John the disciple of the Lord having gone to take a bath in Ephesus and having seen Cerinthus inside the bath, left the baths refusing to bathe and said, "Let us flee lest also the baths fall in, since Cerinthus is inside, the enemy of the truth." Why it's not so bad. If he was in my bathroom I would want to leave also. [Laughter] Well at any rate John is reported to have said that. And it's certainly harmonious with what we know with the Apostle Paul John.

The purpose of 1 John by most commentators is thought of as two fold. There is a polemical purpose. He was fighting the errors of his day, and so he wanted to counter the influence of the Gnosticism that men such as Cerinthus were fostering. But also there was a constructive purpose, and this of course is what we are most interested in. And he's interested in urging the readers to full life and assurance. In chapter 5, verse 13 he says near the end of his letter, "These I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God." And so he was interested in the believers having the sense of the possession of the truth that they had been taught. He was interested, of course, as we're all interested in not simply the apprehension of the truth, but the experience of it as well. And when you read through the Johannine Epistles you notice that that's to the foreground. The exhortations of the apostle are to love on another as Christ loved the church and such exhortations. And so consequently he was

interested in all of the believers of his day having a real sense of the possession of the truth of God and as a result of that, having a sound grasp of the truth of that word. In the gospel and the epistle the apostle's object is to get apprehension of spiritual truth deepened into the experience of it.

Now, I would imagine that all of the Bible teachers in Believers Chapel from Dan on down would be particularly interested in those who listen to them going from apprehension of spiritual truth to the experience of spiritual truth. And in fact, as far as I am concerned, would say that probably most of us here in our own personal life would like very much to be able to make some progress in the experience of the truth that we have at least in measure apprehended. Who doesn't know more of truth than they have truly apprehended in the sense of living that truth. Most of us, I feel, would feel very sure that what we need is more experience of what we have in our heads. So one of the reasons for the lack of understanding of what is happening in the Christian church today is the fact that the experience of the truth is not so strong in most of us. We know a lot of things, but the experience of them is not measurable with our knowledge of those truths. So what John did in his epistle is to give us exhortation and help in moving from the apprehension of biblical things to the experience of them. He didn't have the Bible, of course, but he had Scripture and he knew of Scripture. And so what he knew of Scripture he hoped would become more personally apprehended by all of those to whom he writes. So he wants the experience of the truth to match the apprehension of it. And I must say that's what I would like too, to have my experience of the truth match my apprehension of it.

Now, I'm assuming that I have good apprehension, of course, but it is possible that my apprehension is not what it should be as well. So we study doctrine, but many of us will admit I think, that most of us know more doctrine than we have apprehended in our Christian life. So John writes with this in mind, and I'm going to look at these four verses with that in mind also. He begins with, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen

with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us." So the manifestation of the eternal life is what he begins with. He wants those who are somewhat wobbly in their doctrine to come to a solid understanding of it.

Carl Armerding, used to like to tell of hearing C. Crane, a brethren Bible teacher and writer, give a message in which he put together two texts, John 1:38, "Where dwellest thou?" Answering it with 1 Timothy 6:16, "Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto, whom no man hath seen or can see, to whom be honor and power everlasting." So where dwellest thou? Well, the Son of God dwells in the light which no man can approach unto. These words suggest unto us, at least the fact that he had measured and had managed to live in what he understood of the truth. So this is what the apostle has in mind. It's rather interesting that the epistle has often been called "The Epistle of Eternal Life," and in that sense we are looking at the things that really count.

He begins the first verse by saying, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life." A remarkable preface to an epistle, anyone I think opening 1 John knowing something about the other epistles is surprised at the way that this begins. We normally expect the author to name himself and then to say something about those to whom he's writing. But John passes by all of that and starts out right from the beginning with what he wants to talk about. So it is a remarkable preface. It lacks a salutation. It lacks a personal reference. It outlines God's purpose from eternity to eternity. And if you were looking at this in the original text you would notice that the grammar is somewhat tangled as well. Now I attribute that to the fact that John was an old man. And I fully understand that. I look at some of my beautiful notes and it's not long before I have tangled them somewhat, because I am an old

man. So I'm not surprised that we should have that. What's interesting about it is the Holy Spirit thought it was still worthy of a place in the word of God. So we know that the Lord has a sense of humor. So in this case it's true.

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life." Now that is a very definite statement of the apostle's experience of the truths concerning which he writes. He says that he has heard the message. He has seen with his eyes the things that he writes about. He has looked upon our Lord. He has handled the Word of Life. It's amazing that we have the testimony of someone who really has handled relationship with Jesus Christ. And he writes from that standpoint, and in that case I'm willing to pay attention to what he has to say. So he starts out with the phrase, preceding those of his manifestation, which stands alone in sublime majesty, "That which was from the beginning." So completeness, and then he talks about the historical manifestation, "Which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life." Moves from the abstract to the physical, and the emphasis of course is upon the fact that he has seen the things of whom he writes. He's speaking specifically of having seen our Lord, of course. And so we with the apostles in the form of John may gaze ourselves upon our Lord Jesus Christ with the wonder appropriate for thinking about what the apostle is saying when he says he has gazed upon the one who is the subject of these truths.

Do you notice how he describes the one of whom he writes? "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life." These express the most intimate relationships to our Lord himself, and I'm sure that if we had someone else that didn't have these relationships that he had with our Lord, he would never have put them in that form. This is the form of a person who not only knew our Lord as a person, but had lived with him in the ministry

that he himself had had. So we have a remarkable statement from the last of the apostles of just what the relationship was that existed when our Lord and his apostles were together. "We have looked upon" denotes an intent contemplative gaze.

William Barclay in his commentary says it means to gaze at someone or something until a long look has grasped something of the meaning and significance of that person or thing. Well, that may be carrying it a little too far, but it does mean essentially to look upon in the sense of coming to understand. The Greek word is the word from which we get theater, and so the picture of seeing something, like seeing something in a theater comes to mind. It seems obvious to me that the experience that the apostle writes about would include the resurrection, when the apostles not only looked but also touched him to see that his resurrection body was real. They were convinced that they were looking upon him who had died and was now alive again. And so that's a point that they stress in the things that they write. And John, of course, is the one who particularly writes about that. So the manner of the proclamation, the eternal Son, that which was from the beginning. It stands alone in the beginning to let us know just exactly how specifically important it is that our Lord is an individual who does stand alone.

The historical manifestation follows. "We have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life." George Truett who was pastor of the First Baptist Church here when I was a young man and came to Dallas to go to Dallas Seminary, Dr. Truett was out of the pulpit for illness but came back in and everybody that I knew wanted to hear the famous preacher. And we went down to hear Dr. Truett at the First Baptist Church. It was very crowded that morning to hear him after he had been out of the pulpit for a long time because of illness. Dr. Truett said one time concerning our Lord that he was "God as though he were not man. He was man as though he were not God. He was the God-man and never did a hyphen mean so much, the God-man." Robert G. Lee, another Southern Baptist preacher, also spoke of his dual nature in that way. "As in eternity he leaned

upon the bosom of his Father without a mother. So in time he leaned upon the bosom of his mother without a Father." What a cute and clever statement that is to signify specially the nature of our Lord as he describes it.

So here is the apostle who writes now as an old man about what he has known. "The life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us." Isn't it striking to think that here in the New Testament we have an individual actually telling us what our Lord looked like, what he was like, personal testimony? And John in the epistle has given us something; it seems to me, that is extremely useful to all of us as we think about our relationship to whom. So we have searched the actuality of the revelation of the life of God in Jesus Christ. He's heard, manifested these things about him. He speaks with the authority of human experience and witness and also with the authority of the commission from our Lord himself. The sovereigns of scholarly analysis of course have been seeking ever since the apostle wrote this to cause us to have doubts about exactly what the apostle is saying. But he talks about the fact that he's seen certain things. He's heard them. Things have been manifested to him. He speaks from the authority of personal experience and also from the authority of personal proclamation and commission by the Lord himself. I think the mind is not staggered by his claims. The mind that is not staggered by his claims has not really felt the import of the revelation of truth in our Lord.

Now, when you think about what he claims it's amazing. And it surely is something that is startling. So in verse 3 and verse 4 he speaks of the purpose of the proclamation that he's giving. "That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship *is* with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full." Divine fellowship founded; the Father, the Jesus, then the apostle, then the church, then Believers Chapel. That's the pattern, it's the Father, and then the message follows, our Lord as the revealer of the truth concerning the



Father. The apostles take up the ministry as those who have been influenced by the Father and the Son. And the early church listening to and reading the things that the apostles have written, pick up the testimony; and down to Believers Chapel. At the present time you and I form part of that long train of listeners to the message concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. It really is a challenging thing to realize that we stand in the line of the truth that came from the prophets, the apostles, and our Lord and the history of the Christian church.

In verses 3 and 4 he says, "That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship *is* with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." Divine fellowship founded, the Father, the Jesus, the apostles, the church, then us. You people sitting in the audience here listening to an old man speak to you about the Bible, you belong in this chain of individuals, and you are to carry the testimony that goes all the way back to the prophets, the apostles, our Lord himself, and ultimately the triune God, of course, something that concerns all of those who belong to the family of God, all sinners. He says in verse 3, "That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us." And then he tells us what that fellowship is. Fellowship is salvation in its widest embrace, of course. To have fellowship with God is to have salvation, is to have all the blessings of life. It's to have justification, holiness, and all of the things that have to do with what it is to be a Christian. It's kind of an echo of John 17, verse 3, the Father and the Son on the same level, and we recipients of the blessings. The ultimate response, "And these things we write to you that your joy may be full." We have a message. We have fellowship, and it's to lead to joy. Joy is not happiness of course. But joy is the experience of the truth that our Lord and the apostles have heard about. It's the message of the word of God. It's the entrance into the reality of what it is to be a Christian man or woman. And he looks to the future in that particular way.

I'd like for you to notice also how definitely the apostle writes. In verse 3 he says, "That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and

truly our fellowship *is* with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. We write these things that your joy may be full." We have seen these things. We have heard them, and we are telling you about them. So the apostle writes out of the sense of certainty that he possesses from personal testimony and from personal experience, and from the knowledge of having listened to the Lord himself.

Augustine has a statement about joy that perhaps is worth citing here. He says, "There is a joy which is not given to the ungodly. That of all those who love Thee for Thine own sake, whose joy Thy Thyself art, and this is the happy life, to rejoice in Thee, of Thee; this is it, and there is no other." John Knox, not the reformer, but John Knox the modern day theologian, a far cry from the reformer. John Knox in his book *The Death of Christ* says, "I for one cannot imagine a sane human being of any historical period or culture entertaining the thoughts about himself that the gospel says they stand, often a tribute to him." This is the man in our pulpit today, this John Knox. What a difference from the John Knox that we know of from the land of Scotland. But such is life, it has changed. This statement someone has said of the apostolic objective in the proclamation of the gospel, "namely a human fellowship arising from the divine fellowship is a rebuke to much of our modern evangelism and church life. We cannot be content with an evangelism which does lead to the drawing of converts into the church, nor with a church life whose principle of cohesion is the superficial social camaraderie instead of a spiritual fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."

So I have a word for the elders, also. We're not going to leave them out. But you are the elders of Believers Chapel to guide and direct the saints in the light of the word of God. And you are to remember that in all of the things that you do in this particular assembly, all of its activities, all of the fellowship, all of the things about which you are concerned are to lead to the spiritual well being of the children of God who have been brought into this fellowship. And so we are to remember what is the really helpful food that we are to have in the local church. Some things are

not popular, but they are helpful. And in church life it's the same thing. It's something for all of our good elders to think about when they give direction to the church of Jesus Christ.

Now, John was fighting the Cerinthians, Cerinthus the heretic who lived in Ephesus where John lived. We still have neo-Cerinthians and Gnostics with us. Some still claim the possibility of life and fellowship with God without Jesus Christ playing a significant part at all. All you have to do is to read the theology of the day to know that that's true. The things that the ministers in our churches write about, talk about, and the things really that they preach do not have a specific, careful, exact relationship to our Lord Jesus Christ and the truth about him as is found in holy Scripture. So we still have them with us. Some still claim the possibility of life and fellowship with God without Jesus Christ playing a significant part at all.

Have you noticed really how John puts these words that he's talking about? You can sense, if you put the gospel in your mind as you think about these words you'll understand the place from which he comes, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life." Now it's obvious that he thinks that the gospels contain truth, truth that can be relied upon. He knows it. He knows it better than any professor of systematic theology in any institution of this present day. If we were to gather all of them together and if John were to walk into this room, who would have the best knowledge of the Lord God in heaven? Who would have the knowledge that would really count? Who would be the one that you would want to follow? I dare say if that were true, if we gathered them all in here, including the John Knox from Scotland as well as the John Knox not from Scotland, and then we were to ask genuine Christians if an apostle appeared who would you like follow? Those who want to follow John Knox and the present theologians go over the door over there. Those who want to follow the apostles, out this door. Well I would hope that in Believers Chapel the vast majority, but I'm not sure that all of you, would want to follow them. That's the way life is.

Two dangers are still with us in the church, and I must stop. Some still claim the possibility of life and fellowship with God without Jesus playing a significant part. Two dangers are still with us in the church, the assumption that Christian fellowship is possible other than on the basis of a common faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. There is no such thing as a Christian fellowship apart from fellowship in the truth concerning Jesus Christ. The assumption that it is possible to have a true relationship with God while reject Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the light. And many, many of the ministers in our churches today would say it is possible. We do not need Jesus Christ as set forth in Scripture. So only by thinking right about him is there fellowship with God.

T.S. Elliot said, "Where is the life we have lost in living?" Well this is the word for T.S. Elliot and any of those who do not understand that the truth that the apostles and our Lord proclaimed on the authority, not only of the ministry of the Holy Spirit but of their own personal historical experience, stands behind the truths that are found in the word of God. It's so interesting to me that the way that the apostle writes, there is not any doubt at all about which he says. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life." That is they handled the person of Lord, the incarnate person of Lord. "The life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us." As far as I'm concerned my friends, I want to have fellowship with the apostles. I am thankful indeed for the apostle who has written these words, because it has reminded me again, and it has stirred me again of how important it is for us to take the word of God as we know it and hold it in our hands seriously. And further, live in the light of it. The closer you get to the grave, the more thankful you that you have become acquainted with him who is the message of holy Scripture. I think it's time for us to stop. Let me close in a word of

prayer, and then I would assume that one of the elders, Mark, you will take over and we'll have a short time of prayer. Let's bow in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these words spoken by the Apostle John. And Lord we pray especially that the things that we have again read and pondered may stick in our minds and from...

**[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]**