

THE FELLOWSHIP

An Exposition of First John

by Guy H. King

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CHAPTER ONE -

THE PLEASURE OF THE FELLOWSHIP (I John 1:1-7)

1 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, of the Word of life;

2 (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;)

3 That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

4 And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.

5 This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

6 If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth:

7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

"**THESE things write we unto you that your joy may be full.**" says verse 4. There was so much in the conditions and circumstances of the Early Church - persecution, loneliness, atmosphere, martyrdom - which might be supposed to depress those first Christians; but there were overriding blessings that would minister to "**your joy**". Do you recall the circumstances of the occasion when our LORD JESUS spoke of "**my joy**", (John 15:11)? This passage, then, has things to say to its readers, and to us, that will conduce to real joy of heart.

In coming to the expositional study of this Epistle, there is a great deal that is of interest and importance to scholars in the field of New Testament criticism, and the like, that, by the very nature of our own task, need not detain us. The matter of authorship has been widely discussed; but the old view, that it was written by John the Apostle, has the backing of such distinguished names, of world-wide repute, as Sunday, Armitage, Robinson, Salmond, Chase, Ramsay, Westcott, Gore, Moulton, Scroggie, and others.

As to date, we are inclined to the opinion that A.D. 95-8 is the period of its composition, making it thus (with the 2nd and 3rd Epistles) the last piece of the New Testament to be written before the Revelation. The place where the aged apostle dictated the Letter was probably Ephesus, though it was not specifically addressed to the Church there, being designated as an Epistle General, that is, not meant for any particular place, like the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians,

Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, but for the Church at large, the Christians in general - for you and me, for instance. Let us take up the study of it in that light: as a letter addressed personally to us individually.

We turn, then, to our first section, which will underline for us one of the fundamental truths of the Christian religion, that we are saved not for Isolation but for Fellowship: a community whose nature will make for joy and pleasure in all who really belong. As Psalm 16:11 has it, "**In thy presence is fulness of joy: at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore**". Mark that it is:

A FELLOWSHIP OF LIFE (1-2)

There is something so joyous about virile life! These verses show it to be *A Life which is Eternal*

(a) It runs back into the past: "**from the beginning**"

(1). The Gospel of John (1:1) says it was "**in the beginning**".

The American scholar, Dr. Marvin Vincent, suggests that "in" implies being present BEFORE the creation - and - "from" signifies presence AT the TIME of creation. Somewhat after the two statements, "**the Lamb slain FROM the foundation of the world**" (Revelation 13:8, and the "**Lamb . . . foreordained BEFORE the foundation of the world**" (I Peter 1:19, 20).

(b) It runs on into the future: "**that eternal life**"

(2). Once that life is ours, it never ends for us - "**I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish**" (John 10:28 - in the Greek the negative is doubled, that is to say, "in no wise", "on no account"). Whatever else is said about this life, it endures - the believer has "eternal" life, John 3:15, it always has been; and "everlasting" life, John 3:16, it always will be.

Further, here is *A Life which is Historical* - it is not something merely theoretical, ethereal: the Life, for all its pre-existence, did, at a point of time, appear as an event on the state of human history - "**the life... which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us.**"

(2). John was one of the privileged ones, who had "**seen**" for himself, and so was able to, indeed felt bound to, "**shew**" the fact to others. A "witness" is a two-sided being - the one side of him sees, the other side of him shows (Show and tell); and it is just that dual function that is incumbent upon every true believer - "**ye shall be witnesses . . .**" (Acts 1:8).

Thus we are led on to see this as *A Life which is Personal*

(a) It is personified in CHRIST. When, in our opening verse, it speaks of "**the Word of life**", the capital "W" taking us back to the beginning of the Gospel, it transpires that the Life is not an It, but a He. That runs, almost as a principle, through all the supplies of our spiritual needs.

He not merely gives, but is - "**I am the Bread**" (John 6:35); "**I am the Door**", (John 10:7); "**I am the Vine**" (John 15:5); "**I am the Resurrection and the Life**" (John 11:25) (cf Micah 5:5 "**This**

Man shall be the peace"). Well now, this Life that was the Person, was heard; seen, "**with our eyes**" - no mere illusion, but an evident fact that could be "**looked upon**"; handled - as He said, "**handle me and see**", (Luke 24:39; John 20:27).

(b) He is personally appropriated by faith. It is not for us to have physical contact with Him now; but "**Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed**" (John 20:20). *We may spiritually appropriate Him for ourselves through the medium of the apprehending organ of the spirit - faith, the ear of the soul; faith, the eye of the soul; faith, the hand of the soul, that takes Him for our own.*

So does the "**life**" come to us through that contact. I Peter 2:4, 5 says, "**To whom coming, as unto a living stone . . . ye also, as lively (living) stones.**" Like those electric machines which on your grasping the handles transmit their inherent current into your recipient body. So we have "**handled** Him, and we have **life**, and enter the fellowship of those who rejoice in that priceless boon.

Look again: this comradeship is also -

A FELLOWSHIP OF LOVE (3)

There is something so joyous about real love! And we have here a hint of *The Love of Human Fellowship* - "**that ye also may have fellowship with us**" Those who, in those pristine days, had been in physical contact with the LORD had been drawn together, and bound together, in a bond of mutual love. Like the spokes of a wheel, being so close to the axle, they were so near to one another. And now, says the apostle, not only we who were so close as to touch Him, but "**ye also**" may have the joy and strength of this Christian fellowship.

"*Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.*" It was this quality in the relationship between these early believers that so impressed the onlookers in that rather hard world, "*See how these Christians love one another!*" Oh that, in place of the bickering and backbiting that occasionally disfigure our Christian behaviour, and stultify our Christian testimony, the Church at large were to receive, by the secret given us in Romans 5:8, a new baptism of love, as in the first days of power. The world would still be impressed by such a practical evidence of the reality and joy of our fellowship.

Higher, and happier, still is *the Love of Divine Fellowship* - "**and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.**" (3)

How amazing it is that, being what we are, we receive a welcome into fellowship with Him, being what He is - the atom consorting with the Almighty; the Holy One and the unholy conversing together through the appointed media of Bible and Prayer. Such godly friendship has always been open to those who, whatever their circumstances, have been willing to pay the price of utter fidelity to Him.

- In a difficult age "**Enoch walked with God**" (Genesis 5:22);
- In a degenerate era Noah did the same, (Genesis 6:9).

A like privilege is available to us - on the same terms!

These two fellowships hang together - the one with Him cementing the other; the one with them reflecting the other. A recent correspondent concluded his letter to me, "Yours because His" - yes, that's right: the inter-dependence of the dual fellowship.

Be it noted that GOD sets real store by the fellowship, and warns us against doing any hurt or harm to it - a Christian, a church-member, failing in love towards a fellow-believer, not acting or speaking in an loving way. That is a very serious thing, for it is not only the victim that we hurt, but the LORD Himself, who died for us both. To anyone who harasses a Christian He would say, "**Why persecutest thou me?**" (Acts 9:4).

Note that this blest communion is also

A FELLOWSHIP OF LIGHT (5-7)

There is something so joyous about clear light! The verses tell us a part of *The Character of GOD* - Who "**is light**" (5); not just "gives" - though He does that, John 1:9 - but "IS". Just as "**God is love**" (4:8, 16), so "**God is light**": these qualities are of the very essence of His Being.

Speaking of this passage, Vincent comments that light physically represents glory, intellectually represents truth, and morally represents holiness. There can be little doubt that, judging from the context, the emphasis here is on the sheer holiness of GOD. No careful student of the Bible can fail to observe that there are two facets of the Divine revelation of Himself:

- (1) the joy of "**God is love**";
- (2) the Judgment of "**God is light**".

These are not contradictory, but complementary, as the late H. S. Guillebaud so clearly brought out in his great little book, *Why the Cross?* (pp. 60 ff.). How vividly, and how tragically, the two aspects of the Saviour's weeping and warning, over Jerusalem, in Luke 19:41ff., and Matthew 23:37, 8. Because He is light, "**in Him is no darkness at all**".

So it follows that the Company of GOD - must be compatible.

"**Can two walk together except they be agreed?**" asks Amos 3:3. Alas, even believers sometimes "**walk in darkness**" (6) - that will not mean that they have forfeited the Life, nor strangled the Love, but they have beclouded the Light.

They are still in the Family, but they have broken the Fellowship - even as, in a human family, a child's disobedience causes a cloud between him and his father. How different, how altogether blessed, to "**walk . . . in the light of thy countenance**" (Psalm 89:15): a sun without cloud or mist. If we "**do not**", it is plain falsehood to claim fellowship.

Ah, but thank GOD for those who "**walk in the light**" (7) - who live daily in obedience to Him, and rejoice in His way and will. These know the benediction of the fellowship. Let it be said that such people have a happy sense of comradeship with other believers. "**we have fellowship one**

with another"; and also they have a peculiar sensitiveness to sin, and a looking for a continual flow of cleansing - "**The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth** [that is, goes on cleansing] **us from all sin.**"

Here is a man walking in darkness, because he is blind. In order that he may walk in the light there must first be an initial operation, by the ophthalmic surgeon, who will remove the cataract, and then a continual operation of the tear duct, which will keep on cleansing the optic. The first has happened to every believer, when through the glorious saving operation of the Great Surgeon, we can exclaim, in spiritual significance, "**One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see**" (John 9:25).

And now, as he walks in the light, that is, walks in obedience, he shall know the continual washing that comes from the precious blood of CHRIST.

"I am the Light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life", says the MASTER in John 8:12; and, as we have seen, our passage adds, "**in him is no darkness at all**" (5). By some law of tenure, it would be possible that, while you possessed an estate, someone else might own a parcel of ground within your demesne, and would have right of way through your part in order to reach his plot, to your discomfort, if he were a disagreeable man. However, the LORD said, "**the prince of this world . . . hath nothing in me**" (John 14:30): NO DARKNESS AT ALL! And such is His desire for all His people - "**having no part dark**" (Luke 11:36).

A dark spot will not only dim the fellowship; but it may also endanger other lives. In another book I have used the story of W. Y. Fullerton's which I take leave to include here, because it is so germane to what has just been written.

It happened in the experience of a lighthouse keeper on the Florida coast. One wild night a pane of glass in his lantern was broken, and not having another to replace it, he substituted for the glass a sheet of tin. That night, they say, a ship was beating up for harbour, and it went ashore with the loss of the ship and of human lives besides. Why? The light was not extinguished, the light did not burn dim, but there was one part dark!

Is there any such hindrance in us? Speaking of the darkness of the world around, Philippians 2:15 says, "**Among whom ye shine as lights . . .**" [luminaries], lighthouses set for the help of voyagers on the sea of life, warning them of rocks, guiding them to harbour. Well - is there any part dark? Any bad habit that would lead others astray, that would cause shipwreck in another life? That would be a grievous blot on the Fellowship.

And now, ere we turn from the passage, let us stay one moment longer on that word "**declare**", verse 5 -we had it also in verse 3. It emphasizes the fundamental Christian obligation to tell our discovery to others. In the world of Medicine, it is part of what is called "The Hippocratic Oath", which every doctor is supposed to subserve, that he shall, for the benefit of mankind, publish to his brethren any fresh discovery that he may make in the field of medical science. That is one of the differences between the real doctor and the quack - the latter gentleman keeps his discovery to himself, that he may personally batten and fatten upon it. GOD grant that we may not be quack Christians, but quick to "declare" what we have found in our fellowship in Him.

"I hear a clear voice calling, calling
Calling out of the night,
O, you who live in the Light of Life,
Bring us the Light!

We are bound in the chains of darkness,
Our eyes received no sight,
O, you who have never been bond or blind,
Bring us the Light!

"You cannot - you shall not forget us,
Out here in the darkest night,
We are drowning men, we are dying men,
Bring, O, bring us the Light!"

John Oxenham (*Bees in Amber*)

It is the Resurrection Commission all over again, as we have it in Matthew 28:6-7 - "**Come, see . . . go quickly, and tell.**"

Well, there it is: Life, Love, Light. What pleasure does such a Fellowship betoken for those who really belong!

~ end of chapter 1 ~

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