

Sermon Series – Believe. Live. Love.

#4 - 1 John 2:28 – 3:10

A moment of change

Yes, it's daylight savings time again. There was a particular moment last night when your whole life changed!!

More seriously, I wonder if you can think back and **remember a particular moment when your life *really was* fundamentally changed:**

- Maybe it was a rite of passage,
- For some it might be a moment of significant loss or a great joy,
- For others a time when a relationship moved from casual to serious,
- For others again, a point of great achievement; a goal reached.

In *The First Letter of John*, chapter 3, the apostle John interrupts his flow of teaching to make **an emotional outburst of recall**. He highlights a fundamental point of change in his own life, and the lives of his friends. There's a note of **astonishment** in the original text - *1 Jn. 3:1* states...

“Behold (!) what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we could be called **children of God**.” (*1 John 3:1 NKJV*)

A Story about John

A 3rd Century historian known as **Eusebius** left us an interesting back-story to the later life of the Apostle John. It illustrates the **power of this love of God** that John testifies to, but it also shows the condition of people he served as a leader in the early church.

Eusebius is quoting a 2nd Century Christian scholar, Clement of Alexandria. Here is a paraphrase of Clement's story about John...

‘Listen to a tale, which is not a mere tale, but a narrative concerning John the apostle, which has been handed down and treasured up in memory.’

After the tyrant's (Emperor Domitian's) death, John returned from the isle of Patmos after a time of exile to Ephesus. He then went away upon the invitation from other territories to appoint bishops in some places, in other places to set in order whole churches, and elsewhere to encourage believers in the Spirit.

The story goes, that in one city not far from Ephesus, when he had finished his ministry there, John turned to the newly appointed bishop and introduced him to a young man - a fine figure of a teenager – who was an orphan John had taken in and cared for. John said to the bishop...

“This one I commit to you in all earnestness in the presence of the Church and with Christ as witness.”

The bishop accepted the challenge and promised he would raise the boy as his own and see that he would nurture the boy to a mature life and faith. John then departed to return to Ephesus.

The bishop took the boy in, ‘committed to him, reared, kept, cherished’, and even baptized him. But when the boy was in his late teens the bishop relaxed his close watch on the boy, with the view that Lord would protect him.

But post-Domitian Roman cities could be hostile and dangerous. Some bad boys in the local area corrupted the young man. It started with **the lure of money and entertainment**; then, they committed their first **robbery** together, and soon went on to **greater crimes**.

The teenager’s faith in God and his concern for matters of salvation soon dissipated. He no longer spent time in prayer. He had long abandoned meetings with the church community. On reflection, the young man now considered himself **lost once for all since he had committed such great crimes**. He resigned himself to suffer ‘a like fate with the rest’. Soon, he took the lead and **formed a gang**. He became a bold bandit-chief, the most violent, most bloody, most cruel of them all.

Time passed, and the church of that city called on John to return and strengthen their faith. When John was finished serving them, he said to the bishop,

“Come, O bishop, restore us the deposit which both I and Christ committed to you... over which you preside; the whole church being witness of that fact.”

But the bishop was bewildered and confused –

“Have I unknowingly taken your money and not returned it?” he queried.

John set him straight, seeing his confusion...

“Bring to me the young man I committed to your charge, that I may see his progress.”

The bishop, now groaning deeply and at the same time bursting into tears, said to John,

“**The boy is dead.**”

‘How and **what kind of death?**’ (pleaded John with urgency).

“He is dead to God,” said the bishop; “for he **went the way of the wicked and abandoned his faith** to lead a notorious gang of thieves. Now instead of the church, he lives in and haunts the mountain with a band like himself.”

Clement tells how John immediately **rent** his clothes; then, **beating** his head with great lamentation, he cried out,

“A fine guard I left for a brother’s soul! But **bring a horse** to me and let someone show me the way to the boy.”

John rode away from the church just as he was, and coming to the mountain lair, he was **taken prisoner** by the gang’s outpost. John did not resist arrest, but simply told his captors,

“For this did I come; lead me to your captain.”

The young man was soon in sight, waiting, armed. But when he recognized John approaching, **he turned in shame** to run away.

John, forgetting his age, **pursued the young man** with all his might, crying out,

“Why, my son, do you run from me, your own spiritual father, unarmed, old and frail as I am? Pity me, my son; don’t be afraid; there is still hope of life. I will give account to Jesus Christ on your behalf. If need be, I will willingly endure your death as the Lord suffered death for us. For you I would give up my life. Stand here with me, believe; Christ has sent me for you.”

What happened next resembles a **great Hollywood drama** – the young man stopped where he was, first stopped and looked down; then he threw away his weapons. He trembled and wept bitterly. And when old man John approached

him, the young man embraced him, confessing with great lament, all that weighed his soul down with guilt and shame and fear.

Clement says, the young man was **'baptizing himself a second time** with tears'.

John assured the boy of God's forgiveness, prayed for his repentance, and led him back to the church. John stayed with him, praying and struggling together with him in continual fasting, and counsel until, they say, he had **restored him to full fellowship in the community**.

This story became a renowned example to all the churches of true repentance and a great proof of regeneration - a **'trophy of a visible resurrection'**.

New Birth, New Status, New Life.

This ancient tale gives us some of the colour and emotion that lies behind the declaration in *1 John 3*,

“Behold (!) what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we could be called children of God.” (*1 John 3:1 NKJV*).

The NIV translation says, “See **what great** love the Father has lavished on us...”

The original text means “of what country?”; in other words, **how alien**; how foreign this **manner of love** from God is to mortals like us.

We rarely witness love being “**bestowed**” on a person. It's an unusual idea today – to gift someone lavishly with sacrificial love! Perhaps the closest example is on a **wedding day in the marriage vows** - where we witness each spouse promise love to the other; love that is beyond what either party has earned, love that neither inherently really deserves to receive.

John is a witness in his life that **the love God has given the world in Christ** restores wayward humans from the depths, and changes their status **from “estranged from God” to “privileged family member** in God's household”.

That love affords us a new birth – as he puts it in *1 John 2:29*: Christians are ‘born of him’. It's a major motif of the fourth gospel.

In *John 1* he writes...

“...all who received (Jesus), who believed in his name, he gave power to become **children of God**, who were **born**, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but **of God**.” (*John 1:12,13*)

This idea is expanded in Jesus’ tutorial to the teacher Nicodemus in *John 3*...

“Very truly, I tell you (said Jesus to Nicodemus) no one can see the kingdom of God without being **born from above**... no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” (*John 3:3-6*)

This **change of status** and this **new start to life** with God, explains Jesus, is **not based on one’s own superior knowledge or one’s own ethnic or religious credentials** as Nicodemus may have presumed. Instead, only the gracious bestowing of **love of God that regenerates our lives** will do if we want to know God and be in harmony with God.

“Behold (!) what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we could be called children of God.” (*1 John 3:1 NKJV*).

Nothing compares to the love of God in Christ to the world.

Conclusion

Do you remember a moment when your life changed? Your life with God? Maybe you’ve always had the sense of belonging to God? Or, did you have a dramatic conversion? Was it a slow journey of gradual commitment? Are you in need of a person like John to restore you? Are you, perhaps, that John figure for someone else?

“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! ...Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when Christ is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope purify themselves, just as He is pure.” (*1 John 3:1-3 NKJV*)