

1

It's Real!

1John 1:1-4

"Once upon a time ..."

Remember how exciting those words used to be? They were the open door into an exciting world of make-believe, a dreamworld that helped you forget all the problems of childhood.

Then—*pow!* You turned a corner one day, and "Once upon a time . . ." became kid stuff. You discovered that life is a battleground, not a playground, and fairy stories were no longer meaningful. You wanted something *real*.

The search for something real is not new. It has been going on since the beginning of history. Men have looked for reality and satisfaction in wealth, thrills, conquest, power, learning, and even in religion.

There is nothing really wrong with these experiences, except that *by themselves* they never really satisfy. *Wanting* something real and *finding* something real are two different things. Like a child eating cotton-candy at the circus, many people who expect

to bite into something real end up with a mouthful of nothing. They waste priceless years on empty substitutes for reality.

This is where the Apostle John's first epistle comes in. Written centuries ago, this letter deals with a theme that is forever up-to-date: *the life that is real*.

John had discovered that satisfying reality is not to be found in things or thrills, but in a Person—Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Without wasting any time, he tells us about this "living reality" in the first paragraph of his letter.

As you read 1 John 1:1-4, you learn three vital facts about the life that is real:

1 This Life Is Revealed

As you read John's letter, you will discover that he enjoys using certain words, and that the word "manifest" is one of them. "And the life was manifested" (v. 2), he says. This life was not hidden so that we have to search for it and find it. No, it was *manifested*—revealed openly!

If you were God, how would *you* go about revealing yourself to men? How could you tell them about, and give them, the kind of life you wanted them to enjoy?

God has revealed Himself in creation (Rom. 1:20), but creation alone could never tell us the story of God's love. God has also revealed Himself much more fully in His Word, the Bible. But God's final and most complete revelation is in His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Because Jesus is God's revelation of Himself, He has a very special name: "The Word of Life" (1 John 1:1).

This same title opens John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

Why does Jesus Christ have this name? Because Christ is to us what our words are to others. Our words reveal to others just what we think and how we feel. Christ reveals to us the mind and heart of God. He is the living means of communication between God and men. To know Jesus Christ is to know God!

John makes no mistake in his identification of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Son of the Father—the Son of God (1 John 1:3). John warns us several times, in his letter, not to listen to the false teachers who tell lies about Jesus Christ. "Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ?" (2:22) "Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God; and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God" (4:2,3). If a man is wrong about Jesus Christ, he is wrong about God, because Jesus Christ is the final and complete revelation of God to men.

For example, there are those who tell us that Jesus was a man but was not God. John has no place for such teachers! One of the last things he writes in this letter is, "We are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is *the true God*, and eternal life" (5:20).

False teaching is so serious a matter that John wrote about it in his second letter, too, warning believers

not to invite false teachers into their homes (2 John 9, 10). And he makes it plain that to deny that Jesus is God is to follow the lies of Antichrist (1 John 2:22-23).

This leads to a basic Bible doctrine that has puzzled many people—the doctrine of the Trinity.

John mentions, in his letter, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For example, he says, "By this know ye the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God" (4:2, sco). Here are references, in one verse, to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And in 4:13-15 is another statement that mentions the three Persons of the Trinity.

The word "Trinity" is a combination of "tri-," meaning *three*, and "unity," meaning *one*. A "trinity," then, is a three-in-one, or one-in-three. To be sure, the word "trinity" is not found in the Bible, but the truth is taught there (cf. also Matt. 28:19, 20; John 14:16, 17, 26; 2 Cor. 13: 14; Eph. 4:4-6).

Christians do not believe that there are *three gods*. They believe that one God exists in three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Nor do Christians believe merely that one God reveals Himself in three different ways, much as one man may be a husband, a father, and a son. No, the Bible teaches that God is *one* but that He exists in *three* Persons.

One teacher of doctrine used to say, "Try to explain the Trinity and you *may* lose your mind. But try to explain it away and you *will* lose your soul!" And the Apostle John says, "Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father" (1 John 2:23, NAS). No Person of the Trinity is expendable!

As you read the Gospel records of the life of Jesus, you see the wonderful kind of life God wants us to enjoy. But it is not by *imitating* Jesus, our Example, that we may share in this life. No, there is a far better way:

2 This Life Is Experienced

Read the first four verses of John's letter again, and you will notice that the apostle had a *personal encounter with Jesus Christ*. His was no secondhand "religious experience" inherited from somebody else or discovered in a book! No, John knew Jesus Christ face to face. He and the other apostles heard Jesus speak. They watched Him as He lived with them. In fact, they studied Him carefully, and even touched His body. They knew that Jesus was *real*—not a phantom, not a vision, but God in human corporeal form.

Some 20th-century student may say: "Yes, and this means that John had an advantage. He lived when Jesus walked on earth. He knew Jesus personally. But I was born 20 centuries too late!"

But this is where our student is wrong! It was not the apostles' *physical* nearness to Jesus Christ that made them what they were. It was their *spiritual* nearness. They had committed themselves to Him as their Saviour and their Lord. Jesus Christ was real and exciting to John and his colleagues because they had trusted Him. By trusting Christ, they had *experienced eternal life!*

Six times, in this letter, John uses the phrase "born of God." This was not an idea John had invented; he had heard Jesus use these words. "Except a man

be born again," Jesus had said, "he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . . That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, 'Ye must be born again' " (John 3:3, 6, 7). We can experience this "real life" only after we have believed the Gospel, put our trust in Christ, and been "born of God."

"Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1). Eternal life is not something we earn by good works or deserve because of good character. Eternal life, the life that is real, is a gift from God to those who trust His Son as their Saviour.

John wrote his Gospel to tell people how to receive this wonderful life (John 20:31). He wrote his first letter to tell people how to be sure they have really been born of God (1 John 5:9-13).

A college student returned to the campus after going home for a family funeral, and almost at once his grades began to go down. His counselor thought that the death of his grandmother had affected the boy, and that time would heal the wound, but the grades only became worse. Finally the boy confessed the real problem. While he was home, he happened to look into his grandmother's old Bible, and there he discovered in the family record that he was an adopted son.

"I don't know who I belong to," he told his counselor. "I don't know where I came from!"

The assurance that we are in God's family—that we have been "born of God"—is vitally important to all of us. Certain characteristics are true of all God's children. A person who is born of God lives a right-

eous life (2:29). A child of God does not *practice* sin (which is the meaning of the King James word "commit," 3:9). A believer will occasionally *commit* sin (cf. 1:8—2:2), but he will not make it a habit to sin.

God's children also love each other and their heavenly Father (cf. 4:7, 5:1). They have no love for the world system around them (2:15-17), and because of this the world hates them (3:13). Instead of being overcome by the pressures of this world, and swept off balance, the children of God overcome the world (5:4). This is another mark of true children of God.

Why is it so important that we *know* that we have been born of God? John gives us the answer. There are two kinds of children in this world: the children of God and the children of the devil (3:10). You would think that a "child of the devil" would be a person who lives in gross sin, but such is not always the case. An unbeliever is a "child of the devil." He may be moral and even religious; he may be a counterfeit Christian. But because he has never been "born of God" and experienced spiritual life personally, he is still Satan's "child."

A counterfeit Christian—and they are common—is something like a counterfeit ten-dollar bill.

Suppose you have a counterfeit bill and actually think it is genuine. You use it to pay for a tank of gas. The gas station manager uses the bill to buy supplies. The supplier uses the bill to pay the grocer. The grocer bundles the bill up with 49 other ten-dollar bills and takes it to the bank. And the teller says, "I'm sorry, but *this* bill is a counterfeit."

That ten-dollar bill may have done a lot of good

while it was in circulation, but when it arrived at the bank it was exposed for what it *really* was, and put out of circulation.

So with a counterfeit Christian. He may do many good things in this life, but when he faces the final judgment he will be rejected. "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name? And in Thy name have cast out demons? And in Thy name done many wonderful works?' And then will I profess unto them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, ye that work iniquity' " (Matt. 7:22, 23, sco).

Each of us must ask himself honestly, "Am I a true child of God or am I a counterfeit Christian? Have I truly been born of God?"

If you have not experienced eternal life, this *real* life, you *can* experience it right now! Read 1 John 5:9-15 carefully. God has "gone on record" in His Word. He offers you the gift of eternal life. Believe His promise and ask Him for His gift. "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13).

We have discovered two important facts about "the life that is real": it is revealed in Jesus Christ and it is experienced when we put our trust in Him as our Saviour. But John does not stop here!

3 This Life Is Shared

"That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you" (1 John 1:3). And once *you* have experienced this exciting life that is real, *you* will want to share it with other people, just as John wanted to

"declare" it to all his readers in the first century.

A pastor had a phone call from an angry woman. "I have received a piece of religious literature from your church," she shouted, "and I resent your using the mails to upset people!"

"What was so upsetting about a piece of mail from a church?" the pastor asked calmly.

"You have no right to try to change my religion!" the woman stormed. "You have your religion and I have mine, and I'm not trying to change yours!" (She really was, but the pastor didn't argue with her.)

"Changing your religion, or anybody else's religion, is not our purpose," the pastor explained. "But we have experienced a wonderful new life through faith in Christ, and we want to do all we can to share it with others."

Many people (including some Christians) have the idea that "witnessing" means wrangling over the differences in religious beliefs, or sitting down and comparing churches.

That isn't what John had in mind! He tells us that witnessing means sharing our spiritual experiences with others—both by the lives that we live and by the words that we speak.

John wrote this letter to share Christ with us. As you read it, you will discover that John had in mind *five* purposes for sharing:

/ *That We May Have Fellowship (1 John 1:3).* This word "fellowship" is an important one in the vocabulary of a Christian. It simply means "to have in common." As sinners, men have nothing in common with a holy God. But God in His grace sent Christ to have something in common with men. Christ

took upon Himself a human body and became a man. Then He went to the Cross and took upon that body the sins of the world (1 Peter 2:24). Because He paid the price for our sins, the way is open for God to forgive us and take us into His family. When we trust Christ, we become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). The term translated "partakers" in Peter's epistle is from the same Greek root as the term translated "fellowship" in 1 John 1:3.

What a thrilling miracle! Jesus Christ took upon Himself the nature of man that by faith we may receive the very nature of God!

A famous British writer was leaving Liverpool by ship. He noticed that the other passengers were waving to friends on the dock. He rushed down to the dock and stopped a little boy. "Would you wave to me if I paid you?" he asked the lad, and of course the boy agreed. The writer rushed back on board and leaned over the rail, glad for someone to wave to. And sure enough, there was the boy waving back to him!

A foolish story? Perhaps—but it reminds us that *man hates loneliness*. All of us want to be wanted. The life that is *real* helps to solve the basic problem of loneliness, for Christians have genuine fellowship with God and with one another. Jesus promised, "Lo, I am with you always" (Matt. 28:20). In his letter, John explains the secret of fellowship with God and with other Christians. This is the first purpose John mentions for the writing of his letter—the sharing of his experience of eternal life.

2 *That We May Have Joy (1 John 1:4)*. Fellowship is Christ's answer to the loneliness of life. Joy is His

answer to the emptiness, the hollowness of life.

John, in his epistle, uses the word "joy" only once, but the idea of joy runs through the entire letter. Joy is not something that we manufacture for ourselves; joy is a wonderful by-product of our fellowship with God. David knew the joy which John mentions; he said, "In Thy presence is fullness of joy" (Ps. 16:11).

Basically, sin is the cause of the unhappiness that overwhelms our world today. Sin promises joy but it always produces sorrow. The pleasures of sin are temporary—they are only for a season (Heb. 11:25). God's pleasures last eternally—they are for evermore (Ps. 16:11).

The life that is real produces a joy that is real—not some limp substitute. Jesus said, the night before He was crucified, "Your joy no man taketh from you" (John 16:22). "These things have I spoken unto you, that My joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full" (15:11).

Karl Marx wrote, "The first requisite for the people's happiness is the abolition of religion." But the Apostle John writes, in effect, "Faith in Jesus Christ gives you a joy that can never be duplicated by the world. I have experienced this joy myself, and I want to share it with you."

3 That We May Not Sin (1 John 2:1). John faces the problem of sin squarely (cf. 3:4-9, for example) and announces the only answer to this enigma—the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Christ not only died for us to carry the penalty of our sins, but rose from the dead in order to intercede for us at the throne of God: "If any man sin, we have an Advocate with

the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (2:1).

Christ is our Representative. He defends us at the Father's throne. Satan may stand there as the accuser of the brethren (Rev. 12:10; Zech. 3), but Christ stands there as our Advocate—He pleads on our behalf! Continuing forgiveness, in response to His prayers, is God's answer to our sinfulness.

"I would like to become a Christian," an interested woman said to a visiting pastor, "but I'm afraid I can't hold out. I'm sure to sin again!"

Turning to 1 John 1, the pastor said, "No doubt you *will* sin again, because God says, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us' (v. 8). But if you *do* sin, God will forgive you if you will confess your sin to Him. But it isn't *necessary* for Christians to sin. As we walk in fellowship with God and in obedience to His Word, He gives us ability to resist and to have victory over temptation."

Then the pastor remembered that the woman had gone through surgery some months before.

"When you had your surgery," he asked, "was there a possibility of complications or problems afterward?"

"Oh, yes," she replied. "But whenever I had a problem, I went to see the doctor and he took care of it."

Then the truth hit her! "I see it!" she exclaimed. "Christ is always available to keep me out of sin or to forgive my sin!"

The life that is real is a life of *victory*. In this letter, John tells us how to draw on our divine resources to experience victory over temptation and sin.

4 *That We May Not Be Deceived (1 John 2:26).*

As never before, Christians today need ability to distinguish between right and wrong, between truth and error. The notion is widespread, in our generation, that there are no "absolutes"—that *nothing* is *always* wrong and that *nothing* is *always* right. False doctrines, therefore, are more prevalent than at any time in history—and most men and women seem to be willing to accept almost any teaching except the truths of the Bible.

In John's epistle is a word that no other New Testament writer uses—"antichrist" (2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). That prefix "anti-" has two meanings: *against* and *instead of*. There are in this world teachers of lies who are opposed to Christ, and their method of "seducing" people is to use *lies*. They offer a substitute Christ, a substitute salvation, and a substitute Bible. They want to give you something *instead of the* real Word of God and real eternal life.

Christ is the Truth (John 14:6), but Satan is the liar (8:44). The devil leads people astray—not necessarily with gross sensual sins, but with half-truths and outright lies. He began his career of seducing men in the Garden of Eden. He asked Eve, "Yea, hath God said?" Even then, he did not appear to her in his true nature, but masqueraded as a beautiful creature (cf. 2 Cor. 11:13-15).

Satan today often spreads his lies even through religious groups! Not every man standing in a pulpit is preaching the truth of the Word of God. False preachers and false religious teachers have always been among the devil's favorite and most effective tools.

How can Christians today detect Satan's lies? How

can they identify false teachers? How can they grow in their own knowledge of the truth so that they will not be victims of false doctrines?

John answers these questions. The life that is real is characterized by discernment.

The Holy Spirit, referred to by John as "the Anointing... ye have received of Him" (1 John 2:27), is Christ's answer to our need for discernment. The Spirit is our Teacher; it is He who enables us to detect truth and error and to remain ("abide") in Christ. He is our protection against ignorance, deception, and untruth.

The discernment of false doctrines and of false teachers will come to our attention again in chapters 5 and 6 of this book.

5 *That We May Know We Are Saved* (1 John 5:13). We have already touched on this truth, but it is so important that it bears repeating. The life that is real is not built on the empty hopes—or wishes—based on human supposings. It is built on assurance. In fact, as you read John's letter you encounter the word *know* more than 30 times. No Christian, if he is asked whether or not he is going to heaven, needs to say "I *hope* so" or "I *think* so." He need have no doubt whatever.

The life that is real is such a free and exciting life because it is based on knowledge of solid *facts*. "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (cf. John 8:32), promised Jesus. "We have not followed cunningly devised fables" (2 Peter 1:16), was the testimony of Jesus' disciples. These men, almost all of whom died for their faith, did not give their lives for a clever hoax of their own devising,

as some critics of Christianity fatuously assert. They *knew* what they had seen!

Years ago a traveling entertainer billed himself as "The Human Fly." He would climb up the sides of buildings or monuments without the aid of ropes or the protection of nets. Usually the whole neighborhood would turn out to watch him.

During one performance, the Human Fly came to a point on the wall of the building and paused as though he didn't know what to do next. Then he reached with his right arm to take hold of a piece of mortar to lift himself higher. But instead of moving higher, he fell back with a scream and was killed on the pavement below.

When the police opened his right hand, it did not contain a piece of mortar. It contained a handful of dirty cobwebs! The Fly had tried to climb on cobwebs, and it just didn't work.

Jesus warned against such false assurance in the passage which we have already quoted. Many who profess to be Christians will be rejected in the day of God's judgment.

John is saying, in his letter, "I want you to be *sure* that you *have* eternal life."

As you read this fascinating letter, you will discover that John frequently repeats himself. He weaves three themes in and out of these chapters: *obedience*, *love*, and *truth*. In chapters 1 and 2, the apostle emphasizes *fellowship*, and he tells us that the conditions for fellowship are: obedience (1:5—2:6), love (2:7-17), and truth (2:18-29).

In the latter half of his letter, John deals primarily with *sonship*—our being "born of God." How can a

person really know he is a child of God? Well, says John, sonship is revealed by obedience (ch. 3), love (ch. 4), and truth (ch. 5).

Obedience—love—truth. Why did John use these particular tests of fellowship and sonship? For a very practical reason.

When God made us, He made us in His own image (Gen. 1:26,27). This means that we have a personality patterned after God's. We have a *mind* to think with, a *heart* to feel with, and a *will* with which to make decisions. We sometimes refer to these aspects of our personality as *intellect*, *emotion*, and *will*.

The life that is real *must involve all the elements of the personality*.

Most people are dissatisfied today because their total personality has never been controlled by something real and meaningful. When a person is born of God through faith in Christ, God's Spirit comes into his life to live there forever. As he has fellowship with God in reading and studying the Bible and in prayer, the Holy Spirit is able to control his mind, heart, and will. And what happens then?

A Spirit-controlled *mind* knows and understands *truth*.

A Spirit-controlled *heart* feels *love*.

A Spirit-controlled *will* inclines us to *obedience*.

John wants to impress this fact on us, and that is why he uses a series of contrasts in his letter: truth vs. lies, love vs. hatred, and obedience vs. disobedience.

There is no middle ground in the life that is real. We must be on one side or on the other.

This, then, is the life that is real. It was revealed in Christ; it was experienced by those who trusted in Christ; and it can be shared today.

This life begins with *sonship* and continues in *fellowship*. First we are born of God; then we walk (live) with God.

This means that there are two kinds of people who cannot enter into the joy and victory about which we are thinking: those who have never been born of God and those who, though saved, are out of fellowship with God.

It would be a wise thing for us to take inventory spiritually (cf. 2 Cor. 13:5) and see whether or not we qualify to enjoy the spiritual experience with which John's letter deals.

We have already emphasized the importance of being born of God, but if you have any doubts or questions, a review of Fact 2 might be beneficial.

If a true believer is out of fellowship with God, it is usually for one of three reasons:

- 1 He has disobeyed God's will.
- 2 He is not getting along with fellow believers.
- 3 He believes a lie and therefore is living a lie.

Even a Christian can be mistaken in his understanding of truth. That's why John warns us, "Little children, let no man deceive you" (1 John 3:7).

These three reasons parallel John's three important themes: obedience, love, and truth. Once a believer discovers why he is out of fellowship with God, he should confess that sin (or those sins) to the Lord and claim His full forgiveness (1:9—2:2). A believer can never have joyful fellowship with the Lord if sin stands between them.

God's invitation to us today is, "Come and enjoy fellowship with Me and with each other! Come and share the life that is real!"