

John the Apostle

(Adapted from: Driscoll, Mark, The Father Heart of God, 2016)

John's Ministry

The Bible introduces us to John when he was a young man—perhaps in his twenties. He was a fisherman working in the family business on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus called John and his brother James to join the first disciples. “Immediately,” Scripture records, “they left the boat and their father and followed him” (Matthew 4:22).

The Scriptures portray John as a passionate, if not impetuous, young man; and his mother, Salome, was possibly the sister of Jesus' mother Mary (Mark 15:40–41; John 19:25). If so, then John was perhaps Jesus' cousin, just like John the Baptizer.

John's father, Zebedee, was a rather affluent businessman with a successful fishing business that included a fleet of ships and employees (Matthew 27:55–56; Mark 1:20). It was at the family business that John worked with his older brother, James, and it seems they probably fished in the same area of the Sea of Galilee as two other brothers, Peter and Andrew, who were also Jesus' disciples.

Arguably, no one knew Jesus as well as John did. Not only were they close friends, but John was only one of three disciples whom Jesus chose to be a part of his inner circle. Peter, James, and John had unique access to Jesus when the others did not. Subsequently, they were present for the raising of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5 and Luke 8) and Jesus' transfiguration (Matthew 17, Mark 9, Luke 9), and they saw Jesus sweating drops of blood in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:44).

These were moments in Jesus' life and ministry when no one else was present as an eyewitness.

At the Last Supper, John sat at Jesus' side and asked who the betrayer of our Lord would be (John 13:23–25). While hanging on the cross to atone for the sin of the world, Jesus looked down at his devastated mother, Mary, and asked John to care for her upon His death (John 19:26–27). John was the first man to arrive at the empty tomb (John 20:1–10) and to recognize Jesus risen from death (21:4–7). John was even gazing into heaven as his best friend Jesus ascended to his eternal throne (Acts 1:1–11).

Who is your best friend? Who is the person you've invited to be with you in your most meaningful and mundane moments? It's the person who knows you best.

In Jesus' life, that person was John.

John's Personality

The Bible reveals John was a force of nature. Jesus gave John and his brother James the name “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17)—which sounds like a pair of tag team wrestlers. And no wonder!

Jesus rebuked James and John in Luke 9:52–55 after they asked for permission to call down fire from heaven to consume and destroy an entire village of godless Samaritans. The brothers had the audacity in Mark 10:35–37 to ask Jesus, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” On another occasion in Luke 9:49–50, John described how he tried to stop someone from casting out a demon because they were not a part of his group.

As a young man, John was—at least on occasion—prone to anger, pride, rudeness, and being unloving. But it was his strength and courage that made John a great disciple who needed to be directed—much like a wild colt needs to be broken so its strength can be harnessed and focused.

Walking with Jesus changed John. In fact, five times John is referred to as Jesus' best friend and "the one whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7; 21:20).

John left everything to walk with Jesus; and in the years that followed, he witnessed firsthand the miraculous life, death, and resurrection of the Lord. When Jesus preached, taught, healed, cast out demons, and raised the dead, John saw it all. Jesus trusted John, and John remained fully faithful to his friend and Lord.

After Jesus returned to heaven, John spent decades caring for the young church, leading them according to the Way and the Truth, and reminding them to "love one another, for love is from God" (1 John 4:7).

John lived a long time. He was the only apostle to avoid martyrdom, although he narrowly escaped death on numerous occasions. John's brother James was the first of the twelve disciples to be put to death for following Jesus, but John was the last disciple to die. He lived to be around 100 years of age. He was the most authoritative Christian leader on earth at the end of his life.

At one point, according to historians, John was boiled alive, but he didn't deny Jesus or die, so he was exiled to a penal colony on the island of Patmos, which is a lonely, rugged, and barren place in the middle of the sea, covered in jagged rocks and beset by high winds.

It was on the island of Patmos where Jesus came down from heaven to encourage his best friend John and reveal to him the book of Revelation. Many tourists have ventured to visit the cave where it's believed John lived and Jesus visited him.

John was eventually released from exile on the island of Patmos and returned to ministry. Church history reports that much of his time was then spent in Ephesus, where history tells us he is buried.

John is mentioned roughly 50 times in the New Testament, which is second only to Peter among the disciples. He and Peter are often mentioned together as partners in ministry throughout Acts (3:1–10, 4:1–22, 8:14–25). Galatians 2:9 speaks of the two men as spiritual "pillars" that held up the early Christian church. John also wrote five books of the Bible (John, 1–3 John, and Revelation), which is more than any of the other eleven apostles. In Acts 4:13, the critics mocked John and Peter as "unlearned men"; but as is often the case, you can't put too much stock in the mockery of critics.

Regardless of what was said about or done to John, nobody could get him to stop talking about Jesus' love. According to historical accounts outside the Bible, it's possible John was a very elderly man when the church gathered to hear him speak about what it was like to hang out with Jesus.

In various ways he would tell them over and over, "You are the children of God. Jesus loves you. Love one another." In doing so, he echoed Jesus' words from John 13:34–35, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you,

you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Roughly 40 times in 1 John, John speaks of love and admonishes Christians to act like brothers and sisters and “love one another” (3:11; 3:23; 4:7; 4:11–12). This is the Father heart in John’s writings.

John’s Legacy

By the time 1 John was written, there were second- and third-generation Christians. Some were halfhearted in their commitment to Jesus. As a result, they were tempted to chase false doctrines and faddish but unfaithful spiritual trends.

After all John had endured with and for his great God and dear friend Jesus Christ, he was not going to allow false teachers to confuse the new Christians. John wrote his letter of 1 John to primarily young and new Christians, as their spiritual father who continually referred to them (and us) as “little children.”

John used other fatherly and familial language as well, including “beloved,” “brother,” and “children,” teaching us “we should love one another” because we are “born of God.” Throughout his letter, John also refers to God as a loving Father, Jesus as our saving Brother, and the Holy Spirit as the One who causes us to be spiritually born into the Father’s family with new brothers and sisters in Christ to love.

John’s Credibility

From John’s day to our own, there’s been no shortage of contradictory yet confident opinions about Christ and Christianity. But whom should we trust as an honest and accurate source of information about both?

John establishes his credibility as second to none in the opening lines of his letter. Unlike anyone else, John’s report about Jesus is firsthand. What he teaches us are things he heard from Jesus with his own ears, saw with his own eyes, and touched with his own hands. And while the book itself doesn’t mention its author, we can assume the author was John for four reasons:

- The style of writing and vocabulary are very similar to John’s Gospel.
- The author claims to be an eyewitness to Jesus’ life (1:1–4; 4:1).
- The early church fathers Ignatius and Polycarp attributed the authorship of the book to John.
- There was no one else alive at the time to speak to the entire Christian church with the authority that John exercises throughout the letter.

John begins his letter by establishing his credibility as a teacher: He was a friend and apostle of Jesus who was present for His entire ministry and to hear Jesus’ teaching, see Jesus’ life and miracles, and touch Jesus’ resurrected body. John’s argument is very compelling because eyewitness testimony would have been the most credible kind of evidence in an age that was devoid of technology.

There is simply no one more credible writer about Christ and Christianity than John, because he was Jesus’ best friend. Of anyone on the earth, he had the most intimate

access to Jesus during His ministry years. He was the last living of the twelve apostles. And he was a “father” of early Christianity who trained the first generations of Christians.