

We're starting a series today about love. One of the problems with that is that love is such an overused term in our culture today. We use love to describe our feelings about a whole range of different things – I love my wife; I love my children; I love my job; I love the sunset over Arran; I love good food – and I love God.

Obviously, I don't love them all in the same way. That's why when we talk about God loving us, and us loving God, people can have a very different understanding of what that means. I suspect that because we live in that culture we find that people who say, "God is love", probably mean God is nice. Then, they have an image of what it means to be 'nice' and they project that image on God. So, when they read something, or hear something about God that doesn't fit into the image they have imposed on God – "God is nice" – they reject that particular notion about God. That's why we're going to spend some time in 1<sup>st</sup> John. It's a letter that sheds light on the whole issue of God's love for us and our love for him. So this is 'Love Illuminated' and today we're thinking about love incarnate.

1<sup>st</sup> John was written by the same person who wrote the gospel of John and he also wrote Revelation, the last book in the bible. Of course, he also wrote 2<sup>nd</sup> and third John! He was one of Jesus' closest friends and had spent time with Jesus and was an important figure in the early church. 1<sup>st</sup> John is great to read after reading the gospel of John because he takes some of the same themes and expands them.

I want you to notice how many times he uses the word 'we' in the first verse:

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.*

Who is the 'we' that John is talking about? Well, it's the disciples and other believers who saw the story unfold. They were eyewitnesses to the life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and commissioning of Jesus. So what John is saying is that what he's about to say is not something that's just theoretical or philosophical, or something that he's read about or heard from someone else. He's talking about something that he has experienced – he touched Jesus. He heard Jesus. He spent time with Jesus and he watched Jesus. He experienced it himself, and not just him, there were others who shared that experience. But what is it that these eyewitnesses have experienced? John says it is the 'Word of life'.

When John uses that phrase it is as a metaphor for Jesus. It is like when Jesus refers to himself as the bread of life or the door. It gives a picture that helps us understand a deeper meaning. It gives us an insight into a reality behind it. That's what a good metaphor should do. When we look for the reality behind the metaphor we can see that 'word' means message, so the idea is that Jesus is the one who brings a message about life. He's the one who brings the message of what life is all about – what it means to really live and experience life.

*The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us*

What is this message of life that John says Jesus is bringing? It is eternal life.

I want to digress a little and spend a few minutes thinking about this idea of eternal life. Again, I think people have very different views on what eternal life actually is. Many Christians think that eternal life starts when you die and if you put your faith in Jesus Christ while you are alive you get eternal life after you die. That is life which never ends and is not restrained by illness or death. But if we see eternal life as something we only experience after we die it is something that is always 'out there'. It is always removed from us, something in the future. Something that doesn't have a lot of connection to the life you're living right now. That might be why whenever you start talking about it people get this glazed look – that's especially true when you're young. When you're young it seems so far away because you're convinced you have years ahead of you.

Actually we all, every human being, live in time but also in eternity. Ecclesiastes 3:11

*He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart*

Every one of us has eternal life but not all will spend it with God. The bible is quite clear about that.

The eternal life that John is referring to is not something 'out there', that is something you only experience when you die. He's talking about a present reality – something you can experience right now.

He's talking about the same kind of eternal life that he heard Jesus talking about which he recorded in his gospel (John 12:25) *Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life (NIV)*

*In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal. (MSG)*

There are two different types of life in this verse but it's another of those times when English has only one word for something where Greek has different words. In Greek the first word is psuche (su-kay) and it relates to the common experiences of life every human being experiences: every experience, good or bad; every relationship, good or bad; it is what is meant by 'my life is great' AND 'my life stinks'! That's the word Jesus uses the first two times in this verse.

The third time Jesus talks of life the word used is 'zoe' – it also means life but here it is accompanied by the word aeon, meaning eternal. So if you love your psuche you will lose it but if you hate psuche in this world, you will keep it for zoe aeon. The primary difference between psuche life and zoe life is that psuche life is fragile, it is constantly changing – we change physically as we get older, our relationships change, our tastes change. So, Jesus is saying that we should not get too enamoured with the psuche life because it doesn't last. It can change without warning.

We all lose our psuche life and every relationship we had is also lost. Our families and friends are all lost in death. Jesus doesn't leave it there though. Jesus says there is another type of life that is available to you. It is going on around you and you might not even be aware of it.

Imagine these two types of life as a vast ocean. The psuche life is like the surface of the ocean. It changes all the time – sometimes it is calm and still, other times the waves are so big you would get knocked over if you went in. Sometimes it is so stormy that even boats get washed ashore. Psuche life is like that.

The zoe life is what is beneath the surface. Under there is a vast and deep ocean that co-exists with the waves on the surface. Under there it is calm and it is unseen by those who sit on the surface. It is deep and vast and awesome and there is an abundance of life there that only a few people ever get to experience. Some people live their entire lives on the surface of the sea dealing with the waves and the constant change and yet never realise that under the surface lies this vast and deep ocean.

It is this life eternal that John is talking about in vs 3-4 in 1 John

*We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. 4 We write this to make our joy complete.*

Here's the thing about joy – sometimes people live their whole lives without ever working this out: joy cannot be achieved by the pursuit of joy. It's so counterintuitive.

Jesus makes that clear in Matthew 5 when he talks about the people who are truly blessed, who are truly happy. He doesn't say, "Happy are those who hunger and thirst for happiness." He says, "Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." "Happy are the merciful." "Happy are the pure in heart." He never says, "Happy are those who hunger and thirst for happiness." You cannot achieve happiness by chasing happiness. You cannot achieve real joy by pursuing joy. Joy is always a by-product of something else – or, in the words of John, it is the by-product of pursuing someone else. John reminds us that complete joy comes from loving God and being in fellowship with him.

This is where it all starts to come together. When we begin to understand what Jesus means when he starts talking about eternal life. When you put together what Jesus says in John 12 about eternal life and what John says here about eternal life you begin to realise something utterly amazing – that is that Jesus is not only the messenger who has come to tell us about life and how to live life in the vast and deep ocean that lies under the waves – he hasn't just come to tell us of this other reality that we might not have been aware of - but that Jesus IS that reality. He is the zoe aeon: he is the embodiment of eternal life. It is all about Jesus. John makes that clear in John 17:3

*Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*

So Jesus is really saying don't fall in love with your life, the psuche life, fall in love with me. The thing is that when we stop loving our psuche life, when we stop trying to pursue the things that we think will make us happy, when we stop trying to pursue joy and we stop trying to pursue the things we think we need to experience to be fulfilled and instead we fall in love with Jesus and start pursuing him for all we're worth, and with all we have, what we find is that we start experiencing the life we have in a much fuller way. We stop looking at the fragile elements of our psuche life to bring us joy – we're not looking at our bank balance, or our job title, or our friends or our hobbies to bring us joy – our joy comes from something much deeper than that, not the changing surface waves but the deep ocean, not the ephemeral things of the world but the awesome presence of God.

So the question is, "Have you tasted the zoe aeon? Have you experienced eternal life in the midst of your life or have you spent your life on the surface of the sea dealing with all the changes of life but unaware of this vast, deep, profound reality that underpins it all? It is something you can tap into right now.

We experience it by entering into a relationship with one who is love – not a concept, philosophy or experience – eternal life is found in Jesus, and only in Jesus. Later on we're going to share together in what is sometimes called the Love Feast – Jesus said, "This is my body, broken for you." Love could be seen, touched and heard. It's not a concept, it's a person. He also said, "This cup is my blood, shed for you." He gave us two objects that we could touch and see and taste that remind us that this life that lies beneath the surface is found in a person, Jesus. John 10:10 *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*