

## John the apostle. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 25 February 2015.

As you know, we are part way through our series of talks about Bible characters who feature in the gospels of the New Testament. Last week, Mervyn gave us a masterly outline of the life and ministry of the apostle Peter. This week we look at the life and ministry of another apostle, a man who probably ranked as Peter's closest friend and companion. I speak of the apostle John, of whom (as was true also of Peter) the New Testament has a tremendous amount to say.

John and Peter had much in common and shared many experiences.<sup>1</sup> They both met Jesus for the first time on the same day<sup>2</sup> – as a result of the preaching of John the Baptist<sup>3</sup> – and sometime later, at our Lord's summons, they both 'immediately' left their joint occupation as fishermen<sup>4</sup> on the Sea of Galilee to 'follow' Him.<sup>5</sup> According to the New Testament Book of Acts and one of the apostle Paul's early letters, their close association together continued long after our Lord's death and resurrection,<sup>6</sup> and they were often seen together later, both preaching and teaching ... at times, engaged in healing at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, being arrested and brought before the Jewish Council, and being sent by the other Jerusalem apostles to investigate and consolidate the response of the Samaritan people to the gospel following the preaching of Philip.<sup>7</sup>

Subsequently, both Peter<sup>8</sup> and John suffered much for their faith, John informing his readers in the very last book in the New Testament that he wrote the book when exiled, as he put it, 'on the isle that is called Patmos (in the Aegean Sea), on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus'.<sup>9</sup> Given that it was John's brother James who was the first of the apostles to die – executed by King Herod Antipas<sup>10</sup> – it is interesting that John himself was the last of the apostles to die ... some half a century later than his brother.<sup>11</sup>

Along with John's brother James, Peter and John formed our Lord's hand-picked 'inner circle' of the apostles,<sup>12</sup> privileged to be the only disciples to accompany the Lord Jesus when He went to raise the daughter of Jairus from the dead,<sup>13</sup> and when He appeared in glory on the so-called Mount of Transfiguration,<sup>14</sup> and who were by far the nearest to Him when He agonised in the Garden of Gethsemane in prospect of His forthcoming suffering and death<sup>15</sup> – on which three occasions, they witnessed, in order, His victory in the chamber of death, His glory on the high mountain, and His agony in 'the Garden of the Oil Press'.<sup>16</sup>

But, again in concert with Peter, the apostle John was not without his faults, and, again like Peter (of whom we heard last week),<sup>17</sup> he earned himself our Lord's rebuke – and, in John's case, did so on no less than three separate occasions. First, there was the time when John said to Jesus, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we forbid him, because he does not follow with us". But Jesus', we read, 'said to him, "Forbid him not, for he who is not against you is for you".'<sup>18</sup>

Then, sometime after, the Saviour, we are told, 'sent messengers ahead of Him, who ... entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for Him. But the people did not receive Him ... . And when His disciples James and John saw it, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But He ... rebuked them'.<sup>19</sup>

On the third occasion, James and John said to Jesus, "Teacher, there is something we want you to do for us".<sup>20</sup> And when He asked them, "What do you want me to do for you?" they answered, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory". Jesus', we read, 'said to them, "You do not know what you are asking<sup>21</sup> ... to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father".'<sup>22</sup>

Clearly at that early stage in what was to prove a long life, John was marked by an intense and fiery zeal which expressed itself in exclusiveness, intolerance and selfish ambition. Small wonder that, in harmony with these traits of character, Jesus had previously given him and his brother the name 'Boanerges', a Hebrew word meaning 'Sons of thunder'.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, John well-earned the description.

As I said, in concert with Peter, John was certainly not without his faults. But also, as Peter, John wrote concerning the One – the only One – who was altogether without sin ... adding to Peter's 'who did no sin',<sup>24</sup> his own 'in Him there is no sin'.<sup>25</sup> It has been well said that, 'If I had not been a sinner, Jesus would not have died. If He had been a sinner, He would not have risen!'<sup>26</sup>

And, like Peter, John contributed books included in our New Testament. Indeed, John penned about one-fifth of the entire New Testament.<sup>27</sup> Not long before the Lord Jesus went to the cross, He foretold to His disciples that the Holy Spirit would 'teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you',<sup>28</sup> and that He would 'declare to you things that are to come'.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, each of these three ministries were fulfilled in John's writings. For John's three epistles contain the Holy Spirit's teaching, his gospel records those things which our Lord said to His disciples, and his Book of the Revelation focuses on 'things that are to come'.

And what tremendous debts we owe to John and his pen:

(i) A debt for *his gospel* (written as he said, 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name'), a book which contains such magnificent gospel gems as 'to as many as received Him, He gave the right to be children of God, to those who believe in His name',<sup>30</sup> and, probably the best-known verse in the New Testament, 'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life'.<sup>31</sup>

(ii) We owe John a debt for *his letters*, which declare that 'in this the love of God was made manifest toward us, that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him',<sup>32</sup> and 'we have seen and testify, that the Father has sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world'.<sup>33</sup>

(iii) And a debt for *his Book of the Revelation*, which proclaims, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing',<sup>34</sup> and we remember that this comes from the pen of the man whose very first encounter with Jesus followed the announcement of John the Baptist when He saw Jesus walking by, 'Behold, the Lamb of God'.<sup>35</sup> John had come full circle.

In his gospel, John has much to say about the love of the Lord Jesus. He tells us, for instance, that 'having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end (to the utmost)',<sup>36</sup> and that 'Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus'.<sup>37</sup> But it is clear the one facet of the love of Jesus which meant most to the apostle John was the love of Jesus for himself personally, for no less than five times he refers to himself simply as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'.<sup>38</sup>

May each of us today enter afresh into that same personal appreciation of the love of Jesus, and so exclaim with John, 'To Him who loves us and has loosed us from our sins by His blood ... to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen'.<sup>39</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although John was the *only* apostle who ventured to stand near 'the cross of Jesus', John 19. 25-26.

<sup>2</sup> John 1. 35, 43.

<sup>3</sup> John 1. 35-42. 'Two of His disciples', John 1. 35 – 'One of them is identified (v. 40) as Andrew; and the other was evidently the Evangelist. This appears from the absence of all further designation, and from the fact that the narrative bears the marks of having been written by an eye-witness for whom each least detail had a living memory ... 'The words (of John 1. 41) imply that someone else was afterwards found; and from the form of the sentence we may conclude that this was the brother of the second disciple, that is James the brother of John', B. F Westcott, '*The Gospel according to St. John: with Introduction and Notes*', pages 23, 25.

Note how Peter begins his summary of the life of Jesus with a reference to the preaching of John the Baptist, Acts 10. 37.

<sup>4</sup> 'James and John, sons of Zebedee ... were partners with Simon', Luke 5. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 4. 18-22; Mark 1. 16-20. That James and John left, not only their father Zebedee, but 'the hired servants', is evidence that the family was relatively wealthy and well-to-do. This is confirmed by the fact that John was personally known to the High Priest, with a right of entrance into the High Priest's court John 18. 15, and also that he had his own accommodation in Jerusalem, John 19. 27. It is also highly likely that their mother, Salome, was among the

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women from Galilee who 'ministered to' our Lord 'out of their substance', Luke 8. 3 with Matt. 27. 56 and Mark 15. 40 (cf. Mark 16. 1; Luke 23. 49; 24. 10; John 19. 25). (Even her ambitious request that her two sons, James and John, might sit on either side of our Lord in His coming kingdom, Matt. 20. 20-21) shows that she was faithfully looking for that kingdom.)

<sup>6</sup> Following our Lord's resurrection, it was Peter and John to whom Mary Magdalene first conveyed the news of the empty tomb, and who, on reaching the tomb, entered, with John alone immediately grasping the significance of the discarded grave-clothes – 'he saw and believed', John 20. 8. See the section headed 'The women' in 'The Sequence of Christ's Post-Resurrection Appearances', accessed at ...

<https://answersingenesis.org/jesus-christ/resurrection/the-sequence-of-christs-post-resurrection-appearances/>

Similarly, later, on the Sea of Galilee, John was the first to recognize the presence of his risen Lord, John 21. 7. (And, as Peter was the first to enter the tomb, so he was the first to enter the water!)

<sup>7</sup> Engaged in healing at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, Acts 3, arrested and brought before the Jewish Council (who 'recognised that they had been with Jesus', v. 13, and to whom Peter and John boldly declared, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard', vv. 19-20), Acts 4, sent by the other Jerusalem apostles to investigate and consolidate the Samaritan's response to the gospel following the preaching of Philip, Acts 8. 14-25. (Note that, along with Peter, John preached 'the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans', v. 25. And this was the man who a few years before would gladly have called down fire from heaven to consume one such village, Luke 9. 54!) Along with James, the Lord's brother, Peter and John had the reputation of being 'pillars' of the church in Jerusalem, Gal. 2. 9.

<sup>8</sup> See John 21. 18-19; 2 Pet. 1. 14. Peter was imprisoned twice in the Book of Acts, on each occasion being set free by an angel, Acts 5. 18-19; 12. 3-10.

<sup>9</sup> Rev. 1. 9. Seemingly working in the quarries there.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 12. 2, in AD 44.

<sup>11</sup> Probably about AD 98 (Easton Bible Dictionary).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Mark 13. 3, where the three are joined by Andrew; that is, two sets of brothers, John 1. 40.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 8. 51.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 9. 28-31.

<sup>15</sup> Mark 14. 32-33.

<sup>16</sup> The Aramaic for 'oil press' is 'gath sh<sup>e</sup>ma□ni□m' – Gethsemane.

<sup>17</sup> Mark 8. 33. Cf. Peter corrected, not only by the Lord Jesus, but by God the Father, Matt. 17. 5, and by the Holy Spirit, Acts 10-11.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 9. 49-50.

<sup>19</sup> Luke 9. 52-56.

<sup>20</sup> According to Matthew 20. 20, their mother accompanied them and made the request, but verse 24 records that indignation was roused 'at the two brothers, strongly suggesting that the desire and the petition were really their own.

<sup>21</sup> Mark 10. 35-38.

<sup>22</sup> Matt. 20. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Mark 3. 17. It could be said that the 'Sons of *thunder*' were all for calling down *lightning* on the Samaritan village!

<sup>24</sup> 1 Peter 2. 22.

<sup>25</sup> 1 John 3. 5.

<sup>26</sup> 'Day by Day: Moments with the Master', page 371.

<sup>27</sup> Of the 7955 (or so) verses in the New Testament, John wrote 1,415 (18%). (Peter wrote 166.) See <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/NT-Statistics-Greek.htm> - with 3 John corrected to 14 verses.

<sup>28</sup> John 14. 26.

<sup>29</sup> John 16. 13.

<sup>30</sup> John 1. 12.

<sup>31</sup> John 3. 16.

<sup>32</sup> 1 John 4. 9.

<sup>33</sup> 1 John 4. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Rev. 5. 12.

<sup>35</sup> John 1. 36.

<sup>36</sup> John 13. 1.

<sup>37</sup> John 11. 5.

<sup>38</sup> John 13. 23; 19. 26; 20. 2; 21. 7, 20.

<sup>39</sup> Rev. 1. 5-6.