

Chapter 2:

John

The Beloved Apostle

John is well known as the beloved disciple. The Bible has many instances that record this. But you could also make a good case that John was an intolerant, loud, and selfish coward. So why is he called the “beloved apostle”? It’s an important question to consider, because each of us has some traits that make us feel ashamed from time to time. Could it be that we could be so bold as to call ourselves Christ’s beloved apostles in spite of our shortcomings?

Like Simon, John was a fisherman. He was the brother of James, another of Jesus followers, and the son of Zebedee. It may be that Zebedee was the boss or owner of the boat, and John, James, Simon Peter, and Andrew were all employees. The Bible records that just after calling Simon and Andrew, Jesus called John and James. Thus they were with Him from the earliest days of His ministry. In Matthew 4:18–22 it says:

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Why would John and his three buddies be so hasty to follow Jesus? The scene doesn’t show that Jesus had been teaching prior to this and the four men had heard him. John had another experience that prepared him for Jesus call. Both John and Andrew had been disciples of John the Baptist, the prophet who lived in the desert and prepared the way for Jesus. In chapter one of the book of John (written by this apostle) verses 35–40 record an early meeting:

The next day John [the Baptist] was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?"

They said, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"

"Come," he replied, "and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour.

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus.

Although it does not say the name of the other mystery disciple with Andrew, one of the characteristics of John's writing was that he avoided referring to himself by name as often as possible. In the next to last verse of John's final chapter, he said, "This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true." Even here he identified the disciple as the writer of the Gospel of John without naming himself. We see that John had been searching for the Messiah even before the beginning of Christ's public ministry. He had followed John the Baptist until he met Jesus. Then he transferred to Jesus as the Lord began His public ministry. So we can't assume that because John "immediately left the boat and followed Him" that he was as spontaneous as Peter.

But like Peter, he was not a man of few words. In addition to this gospel, John also authored First, Second and Third John and the book of Revelation. Only the apostle Paul is credited with writing more books of the New Testament than John. We also know that John lived to be an old man. He wrote the book of Revelation from exile on the island of Patmos around the year 95 or 96 AD. This would have put John in his eighties at least! When the emperor Domitian exiled John to the island it allowed him to escape the martyrdom that claimed some of the other apostles such as Peter and James. This gave John the opportunity to write the book of Revelation at the end of his days.

Prior to this the Bible shows that during his walk with Jesus John enjoyed special favor. He is one of the "inner three" whom Jesus often included in special times. We see John with James and Peter at the Transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:1), at the resurrection of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:37), in a private conversation about the end times (Mark 13:3), and during his troubled night in Gethsemane prior to the crucifixion (Mark 14:33). How John gained this favor is

not clear in the scriptures. What is also difficult to understand is why John is called the beloved disciple, yet Peter and James are not.

The general impression of John is that he plays the straight man, the tender one, the serene and serious counterpart to the cocky and comical Peter. We tend to think of John as the calm and levelheaded half of the Peter and John duo—the Bud Abbott to the Lou Costello. We see him agreeing to take care of Jesus' mother at the crucifixion (John 19:26). We think of the wizened old disciple writing the book of Revelation on the isle of Patmos. We find John resting his head on his master at the Last Supper¹.

The five verses in which John is called the beloved apostle are listed here. Do you see a similarity in them?

One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. (John 13:23)

When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," (John 19:26)

So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" (John 20: 2)

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" (John 21:7)

Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") (John 21:20)

You may have noticed that all five references were written by John himself—the humble writer who would not mention himself by name earlier! None of the other writers call John the beloved one, nor does John call any of them beloved. How pretentious is that? If I could write my own press releases, I'd look good too. I'd be "Brad, the full-haired man." (Not true, as anyone who knows me can attest!)

A closer look at the scriptures reveals a different side of John that does not commend his character to us in such a favorable light. In Luke chapter 9, we see a disciple who is intolerant. While traveling to Jerusalem with his disciples, Jesus had to pass through Samaria. Samaria was a northern region of Galilee.

¹ It was the custom in Israel to recline on a mat while eating. The apostles would have lain on their sides around the meal with their heads toward the food and their feet pointing away. Thus their head would be near the chest of the person beside them. This is why the Bible says that John was reclining next to Jesus (John 12:23).

Though inhabited by Jewish people, Samaria had seceded from Israel proper (referred to as Judah) during a religious dispute.

Imagine what this would be like. We had a Civil War here in this country during which the southern states seceded from the Union. There is little animosity remaining today from this dispute; a person from the north is welcomed in the south and vice versa. But what if the two nations had never reunited? What if the split was over religious issues that still remained to this day? What if both sides felt their faith was superior to that of the other side? We struggle to imagine this in America because we have never experienced it, but we hear of such problems in the news as religious factions in the Middle East war with one another even though they are of the same race and often of the same basic religious stock.

Now imagine you are walking with Jesus through such a hostile and intolerant land. Law enforcement is at a minimum by today's standards. To muddy the waters more, you are walking with the ultimate spiritual leader. If anyone were going to annoy and antagonize this people, you would think it would be this well-known and controversial man. Jesus asked a few of his apostles to go ahead and make arrangements for his travel. This entailed procuring food and lodging. Here is what Luke says of the affair:

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village.

John wastes no time in calling for judgment upon those who oppose him and Jesus. This is understandable in some ways. We are often intolerant too of those who oppose us or our religious beliefs. It happens so often that we tend to think of it as normal and acceptable. We see protests at abortion clinics turn violent. People write angry letters when unbelievers commit offensive acts on television. Wars are even fought in the name of spiritual righteousness. However the Bible records a very different response when Jesus encounters Samaritan opposition. John himself records in chapter 4:4–30:

Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

What a contrast Jesus provides for us when we encounter those who oppose us, those who are different, those who ridicule our Savior. Yet John shows himself to be a leader in intolerance in his encounter with Samaritans. The Gospel of Luke further confirmed this just prior to his previous mention of John's behavior. In Chapter 9:49 & 50, Luke says:

"Master," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us."

"Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."

It wasn't John's malice or religious bigotry that caused him to earn the pet name of the Lord's beloved. Let's look at another example of his character. On the night Jesus was arrested, John showed his devotion and courage by running away naked!

Then everyone deserted him and fled.

A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind. (Mark 14:50–52)

Though all four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John recount the arrest of Jesus, John fails to mention this self-incriminating incident in his own account. He also fails to mention that he tried to call fire down from heaven to roast his opposition. Call it poetic license or whitewashing, John didn't mention his shortcomings in his gospel. We have to turn to Mark and Matthew for the following evidence of John's true character.

In Mark 3:13–19 we read of Jesus appointing the twelve apostles. Some of the men were given new names. Simon was called "Peter". Thomas was renamed "Didymus" which is Greek for "twin". Look at what he called John and James:

Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.

These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter, James, son of Zebedee and his brother *John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder)* Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

Sons of Thunder! How do you get a name like that? What do we know of thunder? It is loud and booming. Along with lightning, it blasts forth with sudden overwhelming force. Could this be the type of voice for which calm and contemplative John was known? If this were the sole instance, it would be presumptuous to say so. But when we couple this with what we already know of John's hasty intolerance in Samaria, it makes sense. In fact, some Bible scholars believe it may have been John's call for fire from heaven that led to this nickname that Jesus uses for John and James.

These two brothers were even able to offend the other ten apostles. As they saw that Jesus was the real deal, they wanted to be at the forefront of His kingdom. They assumed, like many in that day, that Jesus was going to overthrow the Roman government that was occupying Israel. They envisioned a new kingdom like the one of old (and of today) in which Israel was an independent state and the military might of the region. Along with their mother, they came up with a plan that would ensure their position with Jesus. Matthew 20:20–28 tells us what happens:

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

"What is it you want?" he asked.

She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

"We can," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."

When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the

rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

These brothers were out for themselves, for their own glory and position. Have you ever encountered someone in the workplace, who was willing to step on the backs of others to rise to a greater rank? More important, have you ever been accused of that yourself? Perhaps you can find yourself in John in other ways too. Can you recall instances where you acted with rash intolerance toward those who disagreed with you? Have you ever acted with malice or bigotry or been fanatical about your spiritual beliefs? Do you often act with integrity and courage, or have you lived through moments of fear where you ran naked from the presence of the Lord? Have your loud and rash words hurt those around you from time to time? And like John, have you painted your story to look better than it does through the eyes of those who know you?

If you are like me, you can answer yes to *all* of these questions. None of us have lived blameless lives, and I imagine that to one degree or another most of us have stumbled on all of these stones. So where does John get the right to call himself the one Jesus loved?

Here is the key; John understood something very important about being in a relationship with Jesus. At the deepest level, John knew that what made him beloved by Jesus was not what he had done, but what *He* had done. There is nothing we can do to make ourselves more loved by God, but God has done everything to make it possible for Him to accept us.

In his book, *Enjoying Your Journey With God*, pastor Daniel Brown says, "His choice of us makes us special, not the other way around" (p. 61). In the same book, Dr. Brown also says, "You were loved before you were anything; 'loved' was the first attribute of your being." (p. 20).

John understood this. John knew that in spite of his bigotry, spiritual superiority, cowardice, and arrogance, Jesus loved him because of who Jesus was. And we would do well to make it our life's mission to understand this too. Exiled to Patmos as an old man, the victim of much persecution and hardship, the John we see in Revelation (the final book of the Bible) is a joyful and spiritual man. What can account for such joy in the face of tribulation, except the assurance we see in Job (the oldest book of the Bible) when he says, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21). This is an assurance that knows that regardless of the surrounding environment, regardless of the arrows fired at you by this world, God loves you, and "no weapon formed against you shall prosper" (Isaiah 54:17). That is the source of true healing from the sickness of this world.

Life Lessons

We see then that John is not noted just for his bad traits. We can also credit him with being a prolific writer. His letters are infused with tenderness, encouragement, and love. In 1 John 4:7 & 8 he says:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.
Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.
Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

In the five chapters of 1 John, John uses the phrase “dear friends” or “dear children” fifteen times. Through Christ’s presence, John became one of those gentle souls whom wounded people seek. Have you ever known someone like John in a time of desperate need? If so, you’ll know how refreshing the gift of gentleness can be. God took John’s heart and made it as warm as a winter’s fire.

John was also devoted. He would not have been so bold as to ask for special privileges from the Lord if he had not decided to walk with Jesus regardless of where that led. When Jesus asked John and James if they could drink from the same cup, John didn’t hesitate to say they were willing. This devotion led John to live for Christ and to drink from that cup through all his years. His dedication is also a motivation for all of his writing. God chose John as the author of one of the Bible’s most unique books, Revelation. God uses John’s loving tone in that book as He writes to seven churches and commends each one in spite of some shortcomings he sees in them.

One of the most unique characteristics of John is that he confesses that Jesus is not just a teacher, a rabbi, a prophet, a chosen messiah, or a moral leader. John affirms in the first chapter of his very first book, the gospel of John, that Jesus is God incarnate, a fact that offends some of the most vehement enemies of the Christian faith. John opens chapter one of his gospel with these lines:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John². He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that

² This reference is to John the Baptist, not the apostle John.

through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Look at this “Word” who John portrays here. The Word was with God and is God. The Word has always existed and is the creator of all things. The Word is life and light. This Word is the savior of mankind and this Word *became flesh and made his dwelling among us*. This Word is both God and Jesus. John sees that and expresses it better than any other writer in the Bible, and he puts it at the forefront of his first book in the scriptures.

Strengths and Weaknesses

God uses our traits, the traits He gave to us in the beginning. John may have been a Son of Thunder, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, he used his voice to thunder the truth and compassionate love of God to a lost world. This brash but beloved loudmouth surrendered himself so that God's voice could speak through his lips to give us the Bible's most famous verse, John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

This verse is often given as a lifesaver to the unsaved—the same type of unsaved that John had shunned and judged on a road in Samaria. Today, the book of John, because of its gentleness and love, is one of the first books recommended to new believers entering the Kingdom of God. This from a man who once offended all the rest of Jesus closest friends!

John's cowardice disappeared too. The same apostle who ran naked from Christ's enemies endured decades of pain and ostracism for the Lord. Days after running *away* naked from the Lord, John was the first to run *toward* the tomb to verify the Lord's resurrection.

Neither can we credit John with selfish ambition anymore. His exile shows that he put Jesus first and himself last in enduring his banishment. His letters focus on his “dear friends” and not on himself as he gives encouragement and comfort to his friends in their trials.

In John we see a *redeeming* God taking inherent traits that appear as faults to the world and putting them to Kingdom use in remarkable and powerful ways. The tainted traits were washed clean and used for righteousness. More important, John is also a picture of a *transforming* God. Many of the characteristics we see in John in his later days are outright opposed to what we see in an earlier John. We see a coward who becomes brave. We see a self-serving man become a servant to others. We see an offensive loudmouth become a voice of gentleness. We see a man of religious intolerance become the voice to new believers and to the unsaved as well.

In a redeeming God, we take hope that the characteristics the world sees in us will one day be restored to what God intended. In a transforming God, we take hope that the filth that has stained us from our walk in this world will one day be washed away.

My Face in the Mirror

- John showed religious and ethnic intolerance. He was also an offensive coward, and ambitious to the point of selfishness. With which of John’s faults can you identify? (It’s not a shame to respond, “All of the above.”)
- How did God use these traits in John’s later ministry?
- Sometimes God *recycles* our character. He takes innate traits that He placed within us at our creation, repairs the damage, and then reuses them for His purposes. Other times, God *replaces* our character. As we walk through this world, we pick up the dirt and dust of our travels through a filth-ridden world. God does not use this debris; He washes all of it away. Which of John’s characteristics fit the former model and which fit the latter? Do you see God recycling and replacing some of your traits?
- With a trusted prayer partner to help you, list your recyclable and replaceable traits. Then pray together for God’s work in these areas. Meet often to walk through this process. Your friend can offer unbiased judgment and evaluation on your progress. Keep a journal of your progress and refer to it from time to time as you measure your growth.

- Do you see yourself as the one Jesus loved? Can you look away from your shortcomings and sins, from your characteristics, to see the character of the one who has loved you since before you were created? Hebrews 13:8 says, “Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” He loved you then. He loves you now, and He will love you always. Nothing you have done, nothing you are doing, nothing you will ever do can diminish His love for you. Accept that, and let its grace heal you.

