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# Lesson 1

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## The Man John

**A**lthough John's biographical data is understandably fragmentary, we have enough information for a portrait. As you proceed with this lesson, be sure to read each reference cited for whatever information it gives concerning the man John, the beloved disciple of Jesus. Consider your study of this lesson to be a vital introduction to your study of the text of the epistles in the later lessons. For to be acquainted with the man John is to stand in his shoes, as it were, and empathize with him as he shares the truths so precious and glorious in *his* sight.

### I. NAME

The name John was a common one in Jesus' day, just as it was in Old Testament days and as it is today. The Greek name is *Ioannes*, derived from the Hebrew *Yobanan*, which means literally "Jehovah is gracious." Often this name was given to a child as a testimony of the parents' gratitude to God for the gift of a baby (cf. 1 Chron. 3:15).

Five different men in the New Testament bear the name of John:

1. John the Baptist (e.g., Luke 1:57-66; Matt. 3:1)
2. John Mark (e.g., Acts 12:12; 2 Tim. 4:11)
3. Jona, or Jonas, father of Simon Peter (John 1:42; 21:15, 17)
4. John, a relative of Annas the high priest (Acts 4:6)
5. John son of Zebedee (Matt. 4:21), an apostle of Jesus (Matt. 10:2), who called himself "the elder" in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1. This John was the author of the epistles.

## II. BIRTH

The place of John's birth may have been the city of Bethsaida, at the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee. This was the hometown of Philip, Andrew, and Peter (John 1:44). We do not know the date of his birth, but he may have been at least five years younger than Jesus.

## III. FAMILY

John's mother was Salome (cf. Matt. 27:56 with Mark 15:40; 16:1). If, as suggested by John 19:25, Salome was a sister of Mary the mother of Jesus, then Jesus and John were cousins. This would partly explain the special place John had in Jesus' "inner circle."

John's father was Zebedee (Matt. 4:21; Mark 1:19), a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. John had at least one brother, James the apostle (Matt. 4:21), who was executed by Herod Agrippa I around A.D. 44 (Acts 12:1-2). Jesus surnamed both brothers Boanerges, or "sons of thunder," a name indicating perhaps a fiery personality in the young men (cf. Luke 9:52-56). Before becoming a disciple of Jesus, John was in the fishing trade with his father and brother.

It appears that John's parents were well to do, as suggested by the following:

1. Their household had servants (Mark 1:20).
2. Salome helped with the financial support of Jesus during His public ministry (Luke 8:3; Mark 15:40-41).
3. Salome bought spices for Jesus' body (Mark 16:1).
4. John was a personal acquaintance of the high priest (John 18:15), and usually high priests were of the upper class.

## IV. EDUCATION

John as a boy and youth very likely had a thorough Jewish religious training at home. Devout Jewish parents, such as Salome was, placed a priority on this. The reference of Acts 4:13 to Peter and John's being "unlearned and ignorant men" simply tells us that these apostles did not have *formal* training in the rabbinical schools of that day. In present-day parlance, they were well-informed Christian laymen without a theology degree. As a disciple of John the Baptist (cf. John 1:35), John must have learned much from the forerunner of Jesus.

## V. EXPERIENCE

John's life may be divided into two eras: (1) before meeting Jesus, and (2) after meeting Jesus. Of that first era we know practically nothing. The second era was of two periods, which we shall identify as (1) pre-Pentecost period (i.e., up to the event of Acts 2) and (2) post-Pentecost period. Let us now study each of these periods, keeping in mind that the John who, toward the end of his life, wrote the epistles of our study, is the John who was molded and perfected by the experiences of the periods.

### A. Pre-Pentecost Period

The approximate three and a half years of Jesus' public ministry constituted this pre-Pentecost period. John was with Jesus most of this time. He was the disciple greatly loved by the Master (read John 21:7, 20). Of the three disciples of Jesus' "inner circle" (Peter, James, and John), John was the most prominent, whereas Peter was the most active one. (Read Mark. 5:37; Matt. 17:1; 26:37.)

*Stages of discipleship.* The part John played in Jesus' public ministry may be broken down according to three stages. (Read all the passages cited.)

#### 1. First Stage (during the first year of Jesus' ministry)

*a.* John meets Jesus and becomes one of His disciples (John 1:35-39).

*b.* John is with Jesus during most of the first year of Jesus' public ministry.

*c.* John returns to the fishing occupation, at least temporarily. (We cannot be sure of this transfer of activity.)

#### 2. Second Stage (at the beginning of the second year of Jesus' ministry)

*a.* Jesus calls disciples (Peter and Andrew; James and John) to become "fishers of men" (Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11).

*b.* Jesus continues His training of the disciples to be witnesses for Him.

#### 3. Third Stage (four months into the second year of Jesus' public ministry)

a. John with eleven others is ordained to the apostolate (Matt. 10:2-4; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-19). What three aspects of this ordination are mentioned in Mark 3:14-15?

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b. John remains close to Jesus up to His Gethsemane experience (read Matt. 26:37ff.), then flees from His presence at His arrest (Matt. 26:56).

c. John is one of the first ones to view the empty sepulcher of Jesus (John 20:1-10).

d. John with the other apostles obeys Jesus' command to wait in Jerusalem for the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them (Acts 1:8, 12-14).

*Key Experiences.* There were many key experiences of John as he served his Master during this pre-Pentecost period. On page 7 are listed the references to most of these. Read each passage, and record the experience and its significance for John. (Consider also the surrounding context in each case.)

## **B. Post-Pentecost Period**

From Galatians 2:9 we learn that Peter (Cephas), James, and John were leaders of the church at Jerusalem during the first years after Pentecost. Read these passages, which record some of John's activities during this time: Acts 3:1ff.; 4:1-22; 8:14-15. After chapter 8 of Acts there is no mention of John, though he surely attended the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 *if* he was in the vicinity at the time. There is no mention of him in Acts 21, when Paul was in Jerusalem, which would point to the fact that probably by this time at least John had moved to another place.

The latter years of John's life were probably spent around Ephesus, hub city of Asia Minor, where the apostle was teaching, preaching, and writing. The Bible books he wrote (the gospel, three epistles, Revelation) were all probably written between A.D. 85 and 96. Ephesus, you may recall, was the city where Paul spent about three years on his third missionary journey, evangelizing and teaching the Word of God to many converts (Acts 19:1-20). How strong and spiritually mature the young Ephesian church became is suggested by Acts 19:20 and by the profound depths of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, which the apostle wrote from prison at Rome. It was among such Ephesian Christians that John ministered during the last years of his life.

Passage	Experience	Significance
Mark 5:37; Luke 8:51		
Matthew 17:1; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28		
Mark 9:38; Luke 9:49		
Luke 9:54		
Mark 10:35		
Mark 13:3		
Luke 22:8		
John 13:23, 25		
Matthew 26:37; Mark 14:33, 37		
Matthew 26:56		
John 18:15-16		
John 19:26		
John 20:2-3		
John 21:1-7		
John 21:20-24		

Although John's home may have been in Ephesus at this time, he was well acquainted with churches in surrounding cities, such as Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. (Consult a map for these locations.) These are the churches to whom he sent the scroll of his visions received on the island of Patmos, around A.D. 95 (Rev. 1:9-11).

## VI. DEATH

John apparently died in Ephesus soon after writing Revelation. His age at death was about 100. Read John 21:23, and note an interesting reference to the apostle made by Jesus. Of this, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* comments:

If to this [known lot of John, including the Patmos experience] we add that he must have outlived all, or nearly all, of those who had been the friends and companions even of his maturer years; that this lingering age gave strength to an old impression that his Lord had promised him immortality (John 21:23); that, as if remembering the actual words which had been thus perverted, the longing of his soul gathered itself up in the cry, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20), we have stated all that has any claim to the character of historical truth.<sup>1</sup>

We are admitting to sincere curiosity when we say we would like to know how soon after writing, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus," (Rev. 22:20) John's spirit was ushered into the presence of Christ.

## VII. CHARACTER

John, like Peter, is an example of a man with an intense, vigorous nature, which Christ directed to the glory of God. At times John's intensity was unfortunately the channel for evil words and deeds. Read Mark 9:38; Luke 9:49, 54; Matthew 20:20-28; Mark 10:35, and observe John in the dark moments of intolerance, vindictiveness, undue vehemence, and selfish ambition. For the most part, however, the New Testament's picture of John is an attractive and beautiful one. Charles C. Ryrie says, "In actions, in love for the brethren, in condemnation of heresy, John was the intense apostle."<sup>2</sup> Whereas Paul is known as the apostle of faith, and Peter the apostle of hope, John is referred to as the apostle of love. Writes Tenney, "As Christ tamed his ardor and purified it of unrestrained

1. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody, 1957), p. 597.

2. Charles C. Ryrie, "I, II, III John," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1463.

violence, John became the apostle of love whose devotion was not excelled by that of any other writer of the New Testament.”<sup>3</sup> His tender concern for other Christians is manifested most clearly in his epistles, where he addresses his readers as “my little children” and “beloved.” As we study John’s epistles we will be learning more of the character of the one so loved of Christ.

### **SOME REVIEW QUESTIONS**

See how many of the following you can complete without referring back to the lesson.

1. What does the Hebrew word for John mean, literally?
2. Who are the different Johns of the New Testament?
3. Describe what is known of John’s family.
4. Reconstruct a probable biography of John up to his meeting Jesus for the first time. How did he compare in age with Jesus?
5. Review the three stages of John’s ministry in his association with Jesus.
6. Why do you think Jesus chose John to be one of His closest disciples?
7. What was John’s ministry after Pentecost while he remained in Jerusalem?
8. What was John’s ministry at Ephesus up to the time of his death?
9. What Bible books did John write, and when did he write them?
10. Write a paragraph describing the character of John. If you are studying in a group, you may want to discuss this subject.

3. Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 189.