

Who was John the Apostle in the Bible?

The Apostle John is the author of five New Testament books: the gospel of John, the three short epistles that also bear his name (1, 2, and 3 John) and the book of Revelation. John was part of Jesus' "inner circle" and, along with Peter and James, John was given the privilege of witnessing Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah on the mount of the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9). His importance in the twelve grew as he matured, and after the crucifixion, he became a "pillar" in the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:9), ministered with Peter (Acts 3:1, 4:13, 8:14), and finally was exiled to the island of Patmos by the Romans, where he received from God the majestic visions that comprise the book of Revelation.

Not to be confused with John the Baptist, the Apostle John is the brother of James, another of the twelve disciples of Jesus. Together, they were called by Jesus "Boanerges," which means "sons of thunder," and therein we find a key to John's personality. Both brothers were characterized by zeal, passion and ambition. In his early days with Jesus, at times John acted rashly, recklessly, impetuously, and aggressively. We see him in Mark 9 forbidding a man to cast out demons in Jesus' name because he was not part of the twelve (Mark 9:38-41). Jesus gently rebuked him, saying no one could cast out demons in Jesus' name and then turn around and speak evil of Him. In Luke 9:51-54, we see the brothers wanting to call down fire from heaven to destroy the Samaritans who refused to welcome Jesus. Again, Jesus had to rebuke them for their intolerance and lack of genuine love for the lost. John's zeal for Jesus was also influenced by his natural ambition, as seen in his request (through his mother) that he and his brother be seated on Jesus' right and left hands in the kingdom, an incident that caused a temporary rift between the brothers and the other disciples (Matthew 20:20-24).

In spite of these youthful expressions of misdirected passion, John aged well. He began to understand the need for humility in those who desired to be great. John's is the only gospel that records Jesus washing the disciples' feet (John 13:4-16). Jesus' simple act of servanthood must have impacted John greatly. By the time of the crucifixion, Jesus had enough confidence in the young man to turn the care of His mother over to him, a charge John took very seriously. From that day on, John cared for her as if she were his own mother (John 19:25-27). John's rash request for special honor in the kingdom had given way to a compassion and humility that would characterize his ministry in his later life. Although he remained courageous and bold, his ambition was balanced by the humility he learned at Jesus' feet. This willingness to serve others and suffer for the sake of the gospel must have enabled him to bear his final imprisonment on Patmos where, according to reliable historical sources, he lived in a cave, cut off from those he loved, and was treated with cruelty and reproach. In the opening of the book of Revelation, which he received from the Holy Spirit during this time, he referred to himself as 'your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus' (Revelation 1:9). He had learned to look beyond his earthly sufferings to the heavenly glory that awaits all who patiently endure.

John was passionately devoted to the proclamation of truth. No one in Scripture, except the Lord Jesus, had more to say about the concept of truth. His joy was proclaiming the truth to others and then watching them walk in it (3 John 4). His strongest condemnation was for those who perverted the truth and led others astray, especially if they claimed to be believers (1 John 2:4). His passion for truth fueled his concern for the sheep who might be deceived by false teachers, and his warnings about them take up much of 1 John. He had no qualms about identifying as "false prophets" and "antichrists" those who tried

to pervert the truth, even proclaiming them to be demonic in nature (1 John 2:18, 26, 3:7, 4:1-7).

At the same time, John is also called the “apostle of love.” In his own gospel, he refers to himself as “the one whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20). He is depicted as the one leaning against Jesus’ breast at the last supper. His brief second epistle is filled with expressions of his deep love for those in his care. He addresses his first epistle to a group of believers “whom I love in the truth” and exhorts them to “love one another” by walking in obedience to Jesus’ commands (2 John 1:1, 5-6).

John’s life serves to remind us of several lessons which we can apply to our own lives. First, zeal for the truth must always be balanced by a love for people. Without it, zeal can turn to harshness and judgmentalism. Conversely, abundant love that lacks the ability to discern truth from error can become gushing sentimentality. As John learned as he matured, if we speak the truth in love, we, and those we touch, will “in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).

Second, confidence and boldness, untempered by compassion and grace, can quickly turn to pride and smugness. Confidence is a wonderful virtue, but without humility, it can become self-confidence, which can lead to boasting and an attitude of exclusiveness. When that happens, our witness of the grace of God is tainted, and others see in us exactly the kind of person they wish not to be. Like John, if we are to be effective witnesses for Christ, our demeanor should be one that reflects a passion for the truth, compassion for people, and a steadfast desire to serve and represent our Lord by reflecting His humility and grace.