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Introduction and Overview
The First Epistle of Saint John
May 11, 2008

Introduction: Who was Saint John?

Saint John is one of the twelve apostles and an evangelist (the author of one of the four gospels), and the author of three epistles and the Book of Revelation (the Apocalypse). Saint John is also known as the “beloved.” In the Gospel according to Saint John, we read, “*Now there was leaning on Jesus’ bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved*” (John 13:23; see also John 19:26).

Saint John was the son of Zebedee and the brother of Saint James, one of the twelve, the first to be martyred among them by Herod (Acts 12:1-2).¹ Saint John and Saint James had been fishermen with their father. Their mother was Salome, one of the myrrh-bearing women who followed Christ.² According to a certain tradition, Salome was one of the daughters of Saint Joseph the Carpenter from a previous marriage.³ Therefore, she would have been considered as a sister to our Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore, Saint John would have been our Lord’s nephew.

Saint John and Saint James had been disciples of Saint John the Baptist. When Saint John the Baptist pointed them to Christ, they left him and followed our Lord. They were also among Christ’s closest three disciples. For instance, our Lord took Saints Peter, James, and John to witness the miracle of raising Jairus’ daughter from the dead (Mark 5:21-24, 35-43), as well as His glorious transfiguration on Mount Tabor.

¹ Herod Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great who tried to kill our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 2). He was the son of Aristobulus, the brother of Herodias, who was responsible for the death of Saint John the Baptist. He ruled from 41-44 A.D. and persecuted the Christians in order to win favor with the Jews and to solidify his position. At the end of Acts 12, we read that Herod met a violent death. In receiving worship to himself, he was punished and eaten by worms and died (Acts 12:23).

² Compare Mark 15:40-41, “There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome, who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee, and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem,” with Matthew 27:55-56, “And many women who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, were then looking afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons.

³ The Explanation of the Holy Gospel according to Saint John by Blessed Theophylact (11th Century).

Saint John and Saint James were also called ‘boanerges’, meaning ‘sons of thunder.’ They had been marked by impetuosity and energy. For instance, when our Lord was not welcome by the inhabitants of a Samaritan village, Saint James and Saint John became angry and suggested that the Lord call down fire from heaven to burn them up. The Lord, of course, did not heed their request and rebuked them (Luke 9:51-56).

Saint John was the only disciple to follow Christ to the cross and was honored to be entrusted with the care of Saint Mary. He was also one of the first disciples to witness the resurrection, and lived a pure and celibate life.

Saint John wrote his gospel last and wrote it to combat the heresies of Cerinthus and the Ebionites. Cerinthus taught that the world was created by angels, and that Jesus received ‘Christ’ or become anointed with divine power at his baptism and that this ‘Christ’ left him before the passion and resurrection. The Ebionites taught that Judaism was not so much a preparation for Christianity, as an institution eternally good in itself and only slightly modified by Christianity. They were a group of Judaizing Christians that demanded that Christians strictly fulfill the Law of Moses and looked at Christian teaching as merely a supplement to the Law.

For these reasons, Saint John spoke about Christ’s divine generation (see John 1) to refute the idea that Christ only existed after His birth from Saint Mary. Also, as Saint John wrote his gospel later than the other three evangelists, he focused on events not mentioned by them.

Emperor Domitian exiled Saint John to the island of Patmos where he wrote the Apocalypse (Revelation). After Domitian’s death, he returned to Ephesus, where he founded and built up many churches. Saint John reposed in Ephesus after 100 A.D. at a very old age, and was the only one of the twelve not martyred.

We see how Saint John became totally transformed, using his energy to spread the Gospel, to preach with great force, to proclaim the message of love, and to live that message in his life. For example, Saint Irenaeus relays the words of Saint Polycarp, a disciple of Saint John, saying:

There are those who have heard him tell how when John the disciple of the Lord went to bathe at Ephesus, and saw Cerinthus inside, he rushed out of the bath without washing, but crying out,

'Let us escape, lest the bath should fall while Cerinthus the enemy of the truth is in it.'

Also, after his return to Ephesus from exile, Saint John led a young man to Christ and entrusted him with a certain bishop for spiritual guidance. The young man was influenced by evil company and strayed, going off and becoming the leader of a gang of robbers. When Saint John returned and found that this young man had strayed, he rode on a horse up into the mountains (despite his old age) where the thieves' hideout was located. After a dramatic dialogue between Saint John and the young man, love overcame, and this leader of the gang wept bitterly and repented, with Saint John rejoicing that this lost sheep was once again returning to the flock of Christ.

Finally, when Saint John had become very old, it is said that he could no longer walk and teach as before. Supported by two disciples, he went to sacred gatherings, and instead of preaching, he used to repeat the words, 'Children, love one another.' When asked why he always repeated the same words, Saint John replied, "Because this is the command of the Lord, and when this is perfected, it is sufficient."

We will see some of these ideas expressed in Saint John's first epistle.

An Overview of the First Epistle of Saint John

The First Epistle of Saint John is known as one of the *Katholik* epistles. It is not addressed to a particular person or a particular church, but was addressed to all the churches of Asia Minor at that time.

Here is a summary of this epistle's contents:

In the first chapter, Saint John, as at the beginning of his Gospel, refers to the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. He says that we do not preach something imaginary, as if our faith is some kind of myth, but he writes as a witness to our Lord Jesus Christ. He says, "We have seen with our eyes . . . and our hands have handled" (John 1:1). It is as if Saint John is inviting us to experience the joy of being acquainted with our Lord Jesus Christ. He also says that God is light (John 1:5). Just as the sun shines and warms and gives life to everything that exists on earth, God radiates divine lights. Saint John contrasts those who walk in light versus those in darkness. Also, the cross

of our Lord radiates this light and cleanses the souls of those who believe. No matter how sinful our souls are and no matter how much it suffered from the darkness of sin, it is cleansed and illuminated by the blood of Christ. However, if we say that we are without sin, we are fooling ourselves. Therefore, the first step toward salvation is acknowledging our sinfulness (John 1:7-10).

In the second chapter, we are reminded that faith in Christ must be revealed in works of love toward our neighbor. We cannot say that we live in the light of Christian truth, yet hate our neighbor (John 2:1-11). Saint John then writes to different groups of believers (those in different spiritual states), in which all are called to be the light of Christ in the world. We must be careful from a threefold danger: the lust of the flesh (the corrupt nature of man), the lust of the eyes (the desire of the eyes to want to see everything and enjoy whatever is sinful), and the pride of life (that causes us to despise others and to boast of whatever we have received from the world and not from God). The believers are also warned about the Antichrist preceded by many antichrists, which deceive and teach false doctrine.

In chapter three, we are reminded that the children of God live in holiness, and even if they sin involuntarily, they shake it off through repentance and continue to ascend. This is the hope that encourages us to keep on climbing toward Christ. At the same time, the believers should not be surprised if the world hates us.

Chapter four largely focuses on love. Just as God loved us, we ought to be imitators of that love toward our neighbor; not only with words, but with deeds. Our love toward God and our love toward man are unbreakably connected. Saint John reminds us, *“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also”* (1 John 4:20-21).

Lastly, Saint John assures us in chapter five that although the number of believers is relatively few, and that they are hated and persecuted mercilessly by the men of darkness, nevertheless, the victory belongs to the faithful. *“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith”* (1 John 5:4). At the end of

the epistle, Saint John closes with a strong admonition, “*Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen*” (1 John 5:21).

Conclusion

In these Holy Fifty Days, consider the power of the resurrection and the Holy Spirit that turned weak disciples into strong preachers of the Truth. Consider not only the intensity of Saint John’s words as he refutes false teaching and disciplines us, but consider also the intensity of his joy in Christ and his proclamation of the message of love.

Glory is due to our God forever. Amen.