

## ***The Apostle John: His Threefold Spiritual Identity (Jn. 21:20)***

### **I. UNDERSTANDING OUR PRIMARY REWARD**

- A. It is common to hear about sincere believers who are spiritually dry, disillusioned, or burned out. How does this happen? It is by pursuing God and ministry with a wrong mindset. Renewal is within reach of any believer who will change their mindset, as illustrated by the life of John.
- B. Abraham is the father of our faith (Rom. 4:16). God showed him how to live the “life of faith.” The Lord revealed Himself to Abraham as his ***exceeding great reward*** or his primary reward. God promised Abraham wealth, honor, and a historic impact on the nations (Gen. 12:1-3; 17:2).  
***<sup>1</sup>Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward. (Gen. 15:1)***
- C. ***Defining Jesus as our primary reward:*** This includes receiving grace to feel love from God and to love Him in return. The revelation of Jesus’ love and beauty tenderizes and fascinates us. Walking in this becomes our greatest desire, highest life vision, and most urgent prayer request. The Spirit will establish the first commandment in first place in the Church before Jesus returns.
- D. ***Two categories of God’s blessing:*** Our primary reward is Jesus Himself. Our secondary rewards include God’s favor on our relationships and circumstances, and our impact on others.
- E. Secondary rewards can hinder our primary reward. When they increase, some get so preoccupied with them that they become ***distracted*** in their relationship with Jesus, and when they are delayed or decreased, they become greatly ***discouraged***. But when Jesus is our primary reward, we can overcome distraction and disappointment as our heart is renewed by encountering Him.

### **II. JOHN’S TESTIMONY: BECOMING A SON OF THUNDER IN THE SPIRIT**

- A. The life of John provides us with a picture of what it means to have Jesus as our primary reward. When John was young, Jesus prophetically named him a “son of thunder.” This prophecy marked his spirit, giving him a vision to experience God’s thunder. This speaks of the revelation of God’s love thundering in John’s heart along with deep love thundering in him back to God.  
***<sup>17</sup>James...and John...to whom He gave the name...“Sons of Thunder”... (Mk. 3:17)***
- B. The “thunder of John’s heart” was initially expressed through his fleshly personality. Our heart naturally thunders with ambition, lust, rejection, anger, bitterness or fear, etc.
- C. Near the end of John’s life, he wrote his gospel. In John 21:20, he wrote his “signature” for his life work. In this verse, he interpreted what it meant to him to live as a “son of thunder.” This verse tells us how John carried his heart and expressed his highest life goal (his primary dream). It defines what it means for Jesus to be our great reward.  
***<sup>20</sup>Peter...saw the disciple whom Jesus loved [John] following, who also had leaned on His breast at the supper, and said, “Lord, who is the one who betrays You?” (Jn. 21:20)***

### III. UNDERSTANDING OUR TWOFOLD IDENTITY

- A. Our confession is: ***“I’m loved [by God] and I am a lover [of God], therefore I am successful.”***
- B. We are already successful in life if we receive God’s love and return it. We are most effective when we approach life as ***already being successful*** (instead of gaining it from accomplishments). There are two significant aspects of who we are.
  - 1. Our ***spiritual identity*** is our primary identity. It includes *who we are before God* (as people who are loved by Jesus) and *how God sees us* (as people who love Jesus).
  - 2. Our ***natural identity*** is our secondary identity. It includes *what we accomplish before people* and *how they see us*.
- C. John wanted to be known by how he related to Jesus, not by what he accomplished before men.
- D. John had one of the greatest “resumés” in history, by being in relationship with Mary (Jn. 19:26-27) and the apostles, including Peter and Paul. He was instrumental in great revivals and wrote five books of the New Testament. Jesus promised him he would rule on a throne in Israel (Mt. 19:28) and he saw his name on a foundation of the wall in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:14).
- E. John never mentions his own name in his gospel, but refers to himself five times as “the disciple the Lord loved” (Jn. 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20).

### IV. JOHN SAW HIMSELF AS ONE WHOM JESUS LOVED

<sup>20</sup>***Peter, turning around, saw the disciple [John] whom Jesus loved following... (Jn. 21:20a)***

- A. God loves us in the way that God loves God. Jesus feels the same intensity of love for us that the Father feels for Him. This truth gives us the right to stand before God with confidence as one of ***“His favorites.”*** Our confession is: “Jesus, You love me like the Father loves You.”  
<sup>9</sup>***As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in [stay focused on] My love. (Jn. 15:9)***
- B. On the same night that Jesus spoke of His great love (Jn. 15:9), He also told His disciples that they would all deny Him. He knew what He was getting into when He chose us. It is pride to think our sin is bigger than His love. It takes humility before God to be bold in His love.  
<sup>31</sup>***All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night... (Mt. 26:31)***
- C. John took hold of what Jesus said in John 15:9 and held on to it for the rest of his life. It was foundational to his identity. About seventy years later, he was still saying, “I am the disciple that God loves.” When we know the King loves us, we are unmoved, even when others overlook us.

## V. JOHN LEANED ON JESUS' HEART: LOVING JESUS

<sup>20</sup>*The disciple...who also had leaned on His breast at the supper...* (Jn. 21:20b)

- A. John leaned on Jesus' heart—he set his heart to love Jesus and to be as near to Him as possible. This was John's primary life goal, his primary dream. It was his greatest prayer and desire. John had a masculine personality, but was not ashamed to be known as one who loved Jesus.

<sup>14</sup>*Because he has set his love upon Me, therefore I will deliver him...* (Ps. 91:14)

- B. He leaned on Jesus' heart at the last supper, which was soon after Jesus rebuked him for having a wrong spirit (Lk. 9:46-56; Jn. 13:23). John had boldness in Jesus' love, without any shame.

## VI. JOHN POSITIONED HIMSELF TO RECEIVE GOD'S SECRETS

<sup>20</sup>*The disciple who...said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?"* (Jn. 21:20c)

- A. John positioned himself to receive the secrets of Jesus' heart. Having Jesus as our great reward involves gaining insight into what is near and dear to His heart from Scripture, dreams, etc.

- B. At the last supper, Jesus was troubled by Judas' betrayal. It was a great crisis in His team. Judas was Jesus' friend (Mt. 26:50) and was trustworthy enough to be over the money (Jn. 13:29).

<sup>21</sup>*He was troubled in spirit...and said, "...one of you will betray Me."* <sup>22</sup>*Then the disciples looked at one another, perplexed about whom He spoke.* <sup>23</sup>*There was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved.* <sup>24</sup>*Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask who it was of whom He spoke. (Jn. 13:21-24)*

- C. How do we practically receive Jesus' secrets? It is done by sitting at His feet to hear His Word as Mary of Bethany did. One way we do this is by prayerful meditation on the Word. Jesus defined this as good. No one can choose to do this for us. We must choose to do this over and over.

<sup>39</sup>*Mary...sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word.* <sup>41</sup>*Jesus said...* <sup>42</sup>*"One thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."* (Lk. 10:39-42)

- D. Some search the Word only to prepare a message to speak to others, instead of to encounter God.

- E. Mary of Bethany had no public teaching ministry. She sat at Jesus' feet to understand His heart. Determining what it means to spend long hours with God is different for each person.

- F. God gives His secrets to those who desire them enough to sit before Him. John sat before God long hours as David did (Ps. 27:4). The book of Revelation was one of the secrets given to John.

<sup>14</sup>*The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him...* (Ps. 25:14)

## VII. JOHN'S JOURNEY: FROM A WRONG SPIRIT TO A SON OF THUNDER IN THE SPIRIT

- A. John was transformed from being a son of thunder in the flesh to a son of thunder in the Spirit.
- B. In his youth, John was preoccupied with having preeminence over others. On the road to Capernaum, the disciples argued about who was the greatest (Lk. 9:46; Mk. 9:33-34).  
*<sup>46</sup>Then a dispute arose among them as to which of them would be greatest. (Lk. 9:46)*
1. Soon after Capernaum, on the way to Jerusalem, John asked about being the greatest.  
*<sup>33</sup>The Son of Man will be betrayed...<sup>35</sup> James and John, the sons of Zebedee...<sup>37</sup> said, "Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory." <sup>41</sup>The ten...began to be greatly displeased with James and John. (Mk. 10:33-41)*
  2. A few weeks later, John's mother brought up the issue of them being the greatest again.  
*<sup>20</sup>The mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him...asking something from Him. <sup>21</sup>He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom." (Mt. 20:20-21)*
- C. John sought to stop a man from helping others because that man was not under John's authority.  
*<sup>49</sup>John...said, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us." <sup>50</sup>Jesus said, "Do not forbid him..." (Lk. 9:49-50)*
- D. John wanted to call fire down on a city that did not receive Jesus' ministry. A few years later, John prayed to release the fire of Holy Spirit on Samaria (Acts 8:14-15).  
*<sup>51</sup>They [James and John] entered a village of the Samaritans...<sup>53</sup> But they did not receive Him ...<sup>54</sup> James and John...said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire from heaven...as Elijah did?" <sup>55</sup>He rebuked them, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of." (Lk. 9:51-55)*
- E. **Summary:** We embrace a right mindset in becoming a "son of thunder in the Spirit" by setting our vision to go deep in God and making Jesus our primary reward, the primary dream of our life. We must see ourselves differently and change our confession before God. We are those who are loved by Jesus, who lean on His heart in our love for Him, and who seek to know His secrets. Whenever we stumble, we are to repent and confess that what God's Word says is true about us. Even in our weakness, we are the ones that He loves and delights in (Ps. 18:19; 149:4; Isa. 62:4).
1. We confess: "You feel about me like the Father feels about You. I am Your beloved, Your favorite one. You delight in me. You desire me."
  2. We confess: "I lean on Your heart because I love God. That is who I am and what I do."
  3. We confess: "I commit to receive from Your heart by feeding on Your Word. I will sit long hours before You, because I want to know the secrets of Your heart."