

THE LIFE *of* JOHN

From the Son of Thunder
to the Apostle of Love

DEREK W.H. THOMAS

“I have known Derek Thomas for more than four decades as a beloved friend, faithful pastor, gifted teacher, and careful expositor of Holy Scripture. In this delightful volume, he turns his attention to one of the most fascinating figures in the New Testament—the Apostle John. With biblical insight, pastoral warmth, and characteristic clarity, Derek traces John’s remarkable transformation from a fiery ‘Son of Thunder’ into the beloved Apostle whose life and writings bear such powerful witness to the grace of Christ. This is more than a study of John; it is a study of what the Lord Jesus does in the lives of those who follow Him. Informative, engaging, and spiritually enriching, this book will benefit every Christian reader.”

—DR. J. LIGON DUNCAN III
Chancellor, Chief Executive Officer, and
John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology
Reformed Theological Seminary

“There is only one explanation for the fact that a man once described as a ‘Son of Thunder’ has become known throughout the centuries as ‘the Apostle of love’—John realized that he was a ‘disciple whom Jesus loved. In *The Life of John*, we discover what that meant for him—and what it can mean for us. In walking us through the story of John’s life, Dr. Derek Thomas enables us to see Jesus through the Apostle’s eyes. Indeed, this book is as much about Jesus as it is about John—which is, surely, how John would have wanted it. Full of thoughtful exposition and punctuated by illuminating asides, it enhances and enriches our admiration of God’s grace in John’s life and of the Savior he discovered was ‘full of grace and truth.’ *The Life of John* is a book to savor and to treasure.”

—DR. SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON
Teaching Fellow
Ligonier Ministries

Dedicated to
Bob and Linda Bailey
With much gratitude

The Life of John

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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Preface

The history of Christianity includes many fascinating and important individuals whose lives were transformed by the gospel. The Apostle John is surely one of them. So amazed was he that Jesus loved him that he referred to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (e.g., John 21:20).

John was the son of Zebedee and Salome, and he and his brother, James, were called “Sons of Thunder” (“Boanerges”) by Jesus (Mark 3:17). It more than likely depicted their fiery temperaments. But over the decades, John became known as the *Apostle of love*—grace transformed him.

The Life of John is meant to be a sequel to my previously published volume *The Life of Peter*.¹ Though there are unique aspects to the accounts of both John and Peter—they were both members of the twelve disciples and uniquely of the Three (Peter, James, and John)—here I have attempted to focus on the unique features of John’s relationship to Jesus.

Some think that John lived until he was more than a hundred years old. But these extra years are clouded in mystery.

We know that John was in Ephesus for a season and that Emperor Domitian had him exiled to the island of Patmos in the early 90s, late in the first century. (Some place this exile, along with the book of Revelation, which was written on Patmos, in the mid-60s of the first century when the emperor was Nero. But I have adopted the later date.)

John faced many trials in addition to the sight of Jesus’ death (John was present at the cross). He witnessed the beheading of his brother, James (recorded by Luke in Acts 12), as well as the events that led to the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem in AD 70. Later, during the reign of Emperor Domitian, he was exiled to the remote Aegean island of Patmos when John would have been in his early nineties.

John’s writings consist of his gospel, three epistles, and the book of Revelation. His gospel is very different from the three Synoptic Gospels. The

second half focuses entirely on the last week of Jesus' life. Rather than begin with the narrative of Jesus' birth, John begins "from above" with the boldest of statements that Jesus is God from the very beginning. His epistles provide guidance on love, truth, and fellowship. And then there's Revelation! Who has read this apocalyptic wonder and not been fascinated by its many visions?

I am grateful beyond measure for the editorial input of both Debbie Thompson and Grayson Lambert, who have helped shape some of my more awkward sentences. What errors remain are mine.

I am grateful for the hardworking staff of Ligonier Ministries, and in particular Aaron Garriott, for their willingness to publish *The Life of John*. Finally, this book was written after my retirement from full-time ministry when I ministered frequently at First Presbyterian Church, Yazoo City, Miss. My hosts were Bob and Linda Bailey, who were married shortly after I began my travels there. This book is dedicated to them with much gratitude for their friendship.

His Name Was John

Son of Thunder, Apostle of love. His name was John.

From a life of fishing on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus called him to be an Apostle, one of the twelve disciples. He was the only one of the Twelve (Judas having been replaced by Matthias [Acts 1:21–26]) not to be martyred. Indeed, he lived into his late nineties, possibly even turning a hundred, seeing out his final years in the church at Ephesus. For more than fifty years, he witnessed the tempestuous growth of the early church after the death of his brother, James, in AD 44 (12:1–5).

His parents, Zebedee and Salome, called him John, *Iōhannan* in Greek. But the name comes from the Hebrew *Yohanan*, meaning “Yahweh has been gracious.” Perhaps some time had passed between their welcoming James into their lives and John’s birth. The order, “James . . . and John” (see the list of twelve disciples in Mark 3:16–19, for example), indicates that John was younger than James.

John was called to be a disciple at an early age. He would have been the youngest of the Twelve. It is more than likely that John was still a teenager when he first encountered John the Baptist and then the Messiah, Jesus. This might account for the observation that when running to Jesus’ tomb, John outran Peter (John 20:4).

The Unnamed Disciple

We initially encounter John in the first chapter of his gospel. Or do we? His name does not appear in the account of his first becoming a follower of John the Baptist and, later, the Messiah, whom the Baptist had named “the Lamb of

God” (John 1:36). But then again, the disciple John is never named throughout the entire gospel that he wrote.

Written at the end of John’s life, perhaps in the early AD 90s, his gospel is very different from the other three, which are often referred to as the Synoptic Gospels (written in the 40s and 50s). The gospel of John is not an autobiography! The Apostle does not draw attention to himself. In fact, so desirous is he to draw our attention to Jesus that he never once mentions his own name. He does appear in the gospel as a “son of Zebedee,” along with his brother, James (Mark 3:17; cf. John 21:2). And memorably, he also refers to himself as the one “whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23, 25; 21:7, 20). We will have to explain that moniker later!

Since John is not named in the account found in John 1:25–42, some have doubted that the unnamed disciple is John. But it would be so like John to refer to himself in this initial encounter with Jesus simply as “one of the two who heard John [the Baptist] speak and followed Jesus,” the other being Andrew (John 1:40).

Earlier in the passage, we learn that John the Baptist was preaching with “two of his disciples” (John 1:35), one of whom is named as Andrew (Simon Peter’s brother [v. 40]). Assuming that the other was John, both he and Andrew were disciples of the Baptist. We are not told how long this relationship had been forged. Days? Weeks? Months?

But a day came when John and Andrew turned their allegiance to Jesus. It isn’t clear whether the two disciples had been with John the Baptist on the day that he said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Likely, they were there. If so, they heard the testimony that John the Baptist gave about Jesus when He came to be baptized. Initially, some had inquired whether the Baptist was the promised Messiah (vv. 19–21), but he emphatically denied it, saying, “I am not the Christ” (v. 20).

The Baptist

John the Baptist was a strange person. Everything about him—his appearance, his food, his message, the location where he ministered—seemed peculiar. Luke gives a precise time when his ministry began: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region

of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas” (Luke 3:1–2).

Pilate was the fifth governor to rule at Rome’s request over conquered Palestine. The Herod mentioned in this passage is not Herod the Great (who had been ruler when Jesus was born). Herod the Great had made provisions that at his death, governance would be divided among his sons. Herod Antipas (the one mentioned here) was ruler over Judea and Samaria. He had replaced Archelaus, the first tetrarch over Judea and Samaria. Archelaus had been removed because of allegations of cruelty. (Given Rome’s notorious brutality, Archelaus must have been exceedingly cruel.) So Luke puts John the Baptist’s ministry in the years AD 27–29—in other words, the years right before Jesus began His ministry on earth. Luke, ever a careful historian, wants us to understand that he is not writing fantasy (see his reference to the research he has undertaken when he devotes the gospel to the “most excellent Theophilus” [Luke 1:1–4]).

Luke tells us further that John the Baptist was preaching in the desert, the country “around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). It is not a sandy place but an environment of rocks and pebbles, with an occasional bush.

God had sent John there with a message straight out of Old Testament prophecy:

The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

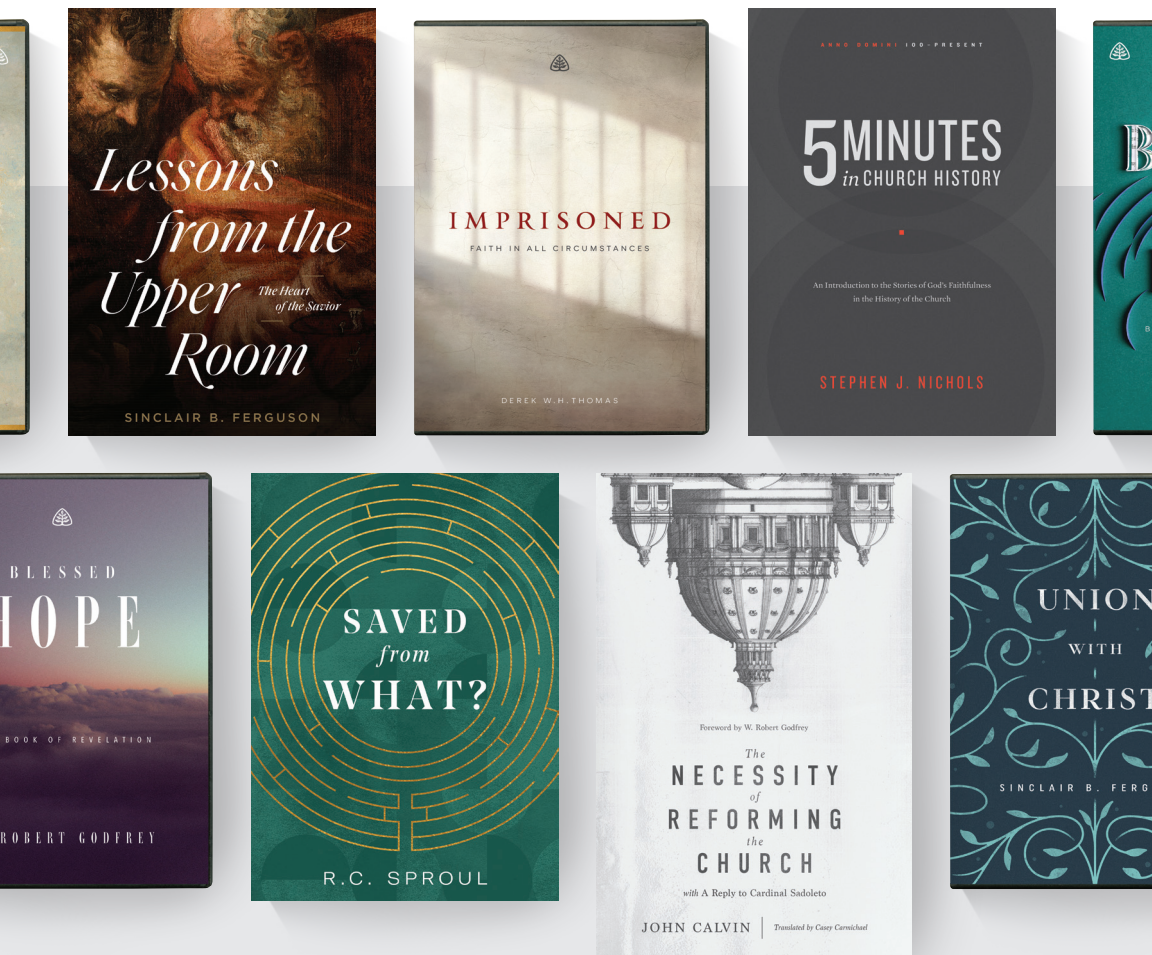
and the crooked shall become straight,

and the rough places shall become level ways,

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” (Luke 3:4–6; cf. Isa. 40:3–5)

Seven hundred years in Israel’s past, the prophet Isaiah had foreseen a day when great blessing would appear. It was a message of a coming Messiah, the fulfillment of a promise that God had made in the garden of Eden when He told the serpent:

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