

Chapter 1

You Can't Drive to Alcatraz

Alcatraz is a twelve-acre island rock rising abruptly out of California's San Francisco Bay. Until 1963, it was the site of a maximum-security federal prison, separated from the city of San Francisco by more than a mile of cold, choppy water. In thirty years, no inmate was known ever to have successfully escaped "The Rock."

From San Francisco, you can drive north over the Golden Gate Bridge to Marin County. You can drive east over the Bay Bridge to Oakland. But you can't drive to Alcatraz.

There is no bridge to Alcatraz.

For a long time, you couldn't have traveled to Space Island, either. Like Alcatraz, it was isolated - inaccessible. But at least you can get to Alcatraz by ferry boat or helicopter. Not so with Space Island. It was stranded. Marooned.

Earth - a lonely rebel island adrift in the sea of space, cut off from the continent of heaven.

Until God built a bridge.

In the beginning was the Word

.He came to His own.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. John 1:1-14, NKJV.

Jesus - the Bridge to Space Island.

The Gospel of John is about that Bridge - a Bridge not just between heaven and earth, but a Bridge spanning the chasm of a broken relationship. A Bridge from God to you - and to me. A Bridge of love.

John's Gospel is not just the mystical record of some great, cosmic connection between two locations in the universe. It is an intensely personal book. It is an unfinished, ongoing love story. It is the story of God's initiatives - and our responses.

Most Bibles today call the book John wrote "The Gospel According to Saint John." But in his younger years John was anything but a saint. He had an explosive temper with a short fuse. He was a stormy, intolerant, ego-tripper - a loose cannon on deck if ever there was one. All around the Sea of Galilee people knew John and his brother James as the "Sons of Thunder." You didn't mess around with Zebedee's boys.

BRIDGE TO SPACE ISLAND

Zebedee, of course, had spent his life in the fishing business, and he passed on the skills of the trade to his sons. Together with Peter, the two brothers set up what became a thriving partnership. John's mother was Salome, and indications are that her sister was Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Even after Peter, James, and John abandoned their nets to follow Jesus, the picture of John that emerges is decidedly unsaintly. When a Samaritan town refused hospitality to Christ and the disciples, James and John wanted to cremate the whole village. And another time, the thunder brothers put their mother up to asking Jesus straight out for the two top spots in His upcoming administration.

For all their rough edges, Peter, James, and John in time became the inner circle of Christ's twelve disciples. And of the three, John was the most receptive to Christ's initiative of love. He seemed the most eager to become like Jesus.

It was John's deep love for Christ which led him always to desire to be close by His side. The Saviour loved all the Twelve, but John's was the most receptive spirit. He was younger than the others, and with more of the child's confiding trust he opened his heart to Jesus. Thus he came more into sympathy with Christ, and through him the Saviour's deepest spiritual teaching was communicated to the people. - The Acts of the Apostles, p. 545.

In his old age, John had become a saint indeed. He witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem. He saw the rise of heresies from within the church and of persecution from without. He was eventually brought to Rome to be tried for his faith, where the enraged emperor Domitian had him cast alive into a cauldron of boiling oil. See The Acts of the Apostles, pp. 569, 570.

When he emerged from the cauldron totally unscathed, the frustrated emperor had him banished to the barren isle of Patmos, where John wrote the book of Revelation. After returning from exile, he spent his final years as the spiritual overseer and shepherd of the churches in Asia Minor.

John, it has been said, wrote with a pen dipped in love. Of all who personally knew Jesus, John responded most fully to Him and knew Him most intimately. To read John's Gospel is therefore to stand on perhaps the holiest ground in all of Holy Scripture. Here we see a love of inconceivable, unimaginable, indescribable magnitude.

BRIDGE TO SPACE ISLAND

In his Ecclesiastical History (3:23), early church historian Eusebius tells a story about John which he had received from Clement, the bishop of Alexandria.

After Patmos, John was visiting one of his churches near Ephesus. Looking out over the congregation, he noticed a tall and unusually handsome young man. Turning to the elder in charge of the church, John said, "I commit that young man into your charge and into your care, and I call this congregation to witness that I do so."

The elder took the young man to his own house and provided for both his material and spiritual needs. The day soon came when the young man was baptized into the church.

But not long after, he fell in with the wrong kind of friends and began a life of crime. In time, he became the leader of a band of murdering outlaws.

Sometime later John returned to the congregation, and to the elder he said, "Restore to me the trust which I and the Lord committed to you and to the church of which you are in charge."

At first the elder did not understand what John was talking about. "I mean," said John, "that I am asking you for the soul of the young man whom I entrusted to you."

"Alas," lamented the elder, "but he is dead." "Dead?" John responded.

"He is dead to God," the elder replied. "He fell from grace and was forced to flee the city for his crimes. He is now an outlaw in the mountains."

John immediately set out for the mountains, where he deliberately allowed himself to be captured by the band of robbers. They brought him before the young man, who was now their chief. In his shame, the young man tried to run away from John. But even though he was now old, John ran after him.

"My son," cried John, "are you running away from your father? I am old and feeble. Have pity on me. Don't be afraid, my son. There is yet hope of salvation for you. I will stand up for you before the Lord Christ. If need be I will gladly die for you as He did for me. Stop! Stay! Believe! It is Christ who has sent me to you."

John's appeal broke the young man's heart. He threw down his weapons and fell sobbing into John's arms. Together the two men - one young and one very old - descended the mountainside to the church below, where the young man was restored to Christian fellowship.

BRIDGE TO SPACE ISLAND

John's love was a direct reflection of Christ's love, which always takes the initiative. If you sense any distance - any separation - between yourself and Christ, be aware that He has already taken the first step to close the gap. He is the Bridge across the chasm in your relationship.

God loves you. Probably a lot better than you love yourself. Certainly a lot better than anyone else does. He is out to win you back. He wants you, needs you, and can't seem to do without you.

The Gospel of John just may be His most forceful and heartfelt appeal to you and me. He's running toward us across the Bridge. Shall we go to meet Him?