

John and his ministry

Part 1

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[00:00:01] I'm not accustomed to speaking from notes, so just bear with me, please.

The topic I hope to be speaking on this weekend is the life and writings of the Apostle John. The Apostle John, one of the followers of the Lord Jesus, was the one who outlived all the others. He's the author of five books in Scripture, the Gospel of John, the first, second, and third epistles, and the Revelation. It's usually assumed that the Apostle John was a young man, perhaps the youngest of the Apostles, when he began to follow the Lord. It may well be that he was in his late teens when the Lord called him to follow. We have no definite word in [00:01:07] Scripture on that, but he lived up into the A.D. 90s. In fact, the Revelation is often dated at A.D. 96, and he was a very old man in any case, whether he was in his teens or whether he was in his 20s. When he began to follow the Lord, he's perhaps beside the point. He no doubt lived to be in his upper 80s or 90s somewhere. Now the Apostle, I want to break our studies down in this way. Tonight, look a little bit at the life of the Apostle John. Tomorrow morning, the first session, the Gospel of John. Then the next session that I would have would be on the Epistles of John, and the final session on the Revelation, the Revelation of Jesus Christ, which he gave through [00:02:07] his servant John. To begin with, let's turn to John 1. I want to read just a few verses there, the Gospel of John chapter 1. And I would very deliberately want to read these verses out of Mr. Darby's translation tonight, especially for sake of one word there. John chapter 1, verse 14, and the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and the next part is a parenthesis, and we have contemplated his glory. A glory as of an only begotten with the Father, end of parenthesis. So in other words, the sentence goes on from the word became flesh [00:03:02] and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, again a parenthesis. John bears witness of him, and he has cried, saying, this was he of whom I said he that comes after me is preferred before me, for he was before me, end of that parenthesis. And the main sentence goes on, for of his fullness, we all have received, and grace upon grace. For the law was given by Moses, grace and truth subsists through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who was in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him. As far as we know, all John's writings were written at a very advanced age, when he was a very elderly man. And so we can say this is probably [00:04:02] written some between 60 and 65 years, perhaps even as much as 70 years after John began to follow the Lord Jesus. And I deliberately read from this translation to get a couple things in here. That first parenthesis, we have contemplated his glory. The glory, the glory is of an only begotten with the Father. I like that word contemplated. You know, to contemplate is not just to take a quick look at something. In our society, everything is fast. And since the advent of television, they say that children's attention span has gone down quite a bit. We never heard about attention span before television came into focus. But they say it's really hurt attention [00:05:06] span. They say the programming for children just has to move along, just like this. Unfortunately, sometimes we try to do

meetings the same way. And Scripture speaks about contemplating, contemplating the glory of the Lord Jesus. To contemplate is more than simply to look at something. It's to look at something, to spend time looking at it while thinking about it. And John says this in retrospect about the Lord Jesus. We have contemplated his glory. We find he gets acquainted with the Lord, and we're going to try to run through this rather rapidly. But I wanted to start here. And I believe the 60-odd years that John spent here on earth, after the death [00:06:05] and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, probably close to 70 years, I believe he was very much occupied with the Lord Jesus. And what is before him as he writes, we have contemplated his glory.

His glory. The glory as of an only begotten, and literally from with a father. He was with the father. He came from the father into this world. And the only begotten, that term is used in reference to rhyme, to importance in Scripture, not only to being the first child that a man begets. Because in the Old Testament, it speaks of making David the only begotten. Isaac is spoken [00:07:07] of as Abraham's only begotten son. The Septuagint, the Greek translation, translates the reference in Genesis by that same word, only begotten, as is of the Lord Jesus. Abraham had an older son, Ishmael, but Isaac was the son whom God had chosen for preeminence. And here, you know, if a man would have only one son, and this son is of greatest importance to him, and there's a closeness between father and son, a fellowship, and then the son comes to represent the father. You know, that's something special. It's not just one of the family. And this is really what we have here. We have contemplated his glory, a glory as an only begotten, from with the father. And it's, [00:08:03] he's the word. The word, you know, a word is the expression of a thought. And the word is the expression of the mind of God. The Lord Jesus come into this world, you know, didn't just say, thus says the Lord, this is what God says, but he was, he was the full expression of God. He is God.

The word became flesh, and John is still enjoying the wonder of it. He dwelt among us to think.

He came here and lived. He dwelt among us. And he says, we've contemplated his glory. And this is the one that John the Baptist is speaking of. And by the way, in the Gospel of John, whenever we read the name John, it does not refer to the disciple, later called the apostle John, [00:09:08] the one who we're going to be speaking about. But whenever John names John, he is referring to John the Baptist. He doesn't call him John the Baptist. Here, he simply speaks of him as John. And he mentions John's witness to the Lord Jesus. This is he of whom I said, he that comes after me is preferred before me, for he was before me. And he goes on in his main thought here, for of his fullness, we have all received and grace upon grace. We're going to see, as we look at the apostle John, that there's reason for his appreciating grace upon grace. And I think all [00:10:01] of us who have come to know the Lord Jesus, who have learned his grace, who have experienced his grace, appreciate that it's grace upon grace. It's not just an initial dose of it, but constant grace. The law was given by Moses, grace and truth. And that is always the order in which we find these two terms in Scripture, grace and truth. Never do we read of truth and grace, but grace and truth. Grace and truth subsists. It has its being through Jesus Christ. There could not be grace and truth, this combination, without the Lord Jesus. No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him. And John writes in this way, [00:11:01] the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, not merely because the Lord Jesus had ascended and gone back to the glory, but in the bosom of the Father speaks to us of being there, enjoying the affection of the Father. And this was ever the case with the Lord Jesus.

And even in those three hours on the cross, he didn't cry out, my Father, my Father, why hast thou forsaken me? No, it's my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? When he was sin-bearer. But

the only begotten Son is in the bosom of the Father, and he's declared him. Well, I want to start here. This is John as a mature old brother who has come to know the Lord Jesus in his youth, who has walked with him, who's observed him, [00:12:05] who has considered what he has observed. He's contemplated the Lord Jesus years and years and years. And what he writes, he shares from that perspective. It's not an account written when he was a young man, when he was following the Lord, but it's written with the maturity that comes of real reflection, real contemplation, real enjoyment of the Lord Jesus. And I say this from the human side, John's writings, as all the rest of scripture, are inspired of God absolutely perfectly. These two sides we always have to see as parallel. God told him what to write, but on the other hand, what he writes is the fruit of his contemplation of the Lord Jesus. And when we read these words [00:13:04] here, we can see that John is not going to mention his name. He's not going to bring himself into prominence. The only one of his writings where he mentions his own name is the Revelation. And there it is mentioned a few times. But ordinarily in his writings, he's going to focus on the Lord Jesus, set him before us. And if he refers to himself in the gospel, he refers to himself usually by what he was in relation to the Lord Jesus, the disciple whom Jesus loved. He learned to appreciate the love of the Lord Jesus. And sometimes he simply says the other disciple. If there were two, he mentions one. And if he says the other one, that's a reference to himself. He prefers to stay in the background, let others have the place of [00:14:07] prominence, and particularly let the Lord Jesus have the place of prominence. Well, I want to run through a few things on this outline very quickly. The disciples, with the probable exception of Judas Iscariot, were all Galileans. And if you want scripture for these things, I would have to give it to you afterwards. But they are referred to again and again as Galileans. In fact, Peter is told that his speech betrayed him. His speech gave him away. The Galilean accent was well known in that time. You know, you can tell if somebody from Brooklyn comes here, and we can tell if somebody from North Carolina comes a bit farther north. And so your accent gives you away. The disciples were from Galilee, and Galilee is called Galilee of the nations. [00:15:07] The people in Galilee were a mixed people. And the people of Galilee being somewhat mixed, were looked down on by the Jews from Jerusalem, where the temple was, and Judea, the surrounding area. So it started with perhaps a bit of a handicap. He's the son of Zebedee, and his mother is referred to in several places. You might want to put a little question mark on that word Salome. But if you compare the accounts of the women who stood at the cross of the Lord Jesus in the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Mark, there's real reason for believing that the mother's name was Salome, and that she was one of the women at the cross of the Lord Jesus. In John's Gospel, it gives us three names, [00:16:06] and it refers to the sister of Mary, the mother of the Lord Jesus. The other Gospels, Mark's Gospel mentions Salome as one of these names. And it would be strange if two sisters each had the first name Mary, which would be the only other way to understand the reference in John if Salome is not this one. But if Salome is indeed the mother of James and John, then she is also the sister of Mary, the mother of the Lord Jesus. So that humanly speaking, it may well be that the Apostle John was a, shall we say, half-cousin to the Lord Jesus. I just mentioned this in passing. It's not that we want to build on something because Scripture doesn't build on it, but it's interesting to see the connection. [00:17:05] Now, it's usually mentioned in the Gospels in connection with his brother James, and it's normally James and John. One finds in looking at the life of the Apostle John that he is usually the one in the background. If there are two, it may be Peter and John, or Peter, James, and John if there are three. James and John, it doesn't turn it around. John, it seems, was very happy to play second fiddle. And they say that's the hardest instrument to play, second fiddle. Most of us find that difficult. We like to have a place.

The younger brother of James and Mark here, they had a successful family fishing business. [00:18:03] The reason I mention it is that in one of the Gospels, I believe it's Mark, when the Lord calls James and John, they leave their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired serpens. So, I would say from

that, a successful fishing business. There were hired serpents.

The business evidently went on under Zebedee's leadership. And even when we first find John mentioned in the Gospel of John chapter one, he has come to listen to John the Baptist. He's become a follower of John the Baptist. If things were really desperate at home, all hands needed on deck of the fishing boat, John wouldn't have been up there following John the Baptist. But it seems the business was going well. In fact, the scripture definitely mentions James and John to be business partners with Peter and Andrew. [00:19:06] This is in Luke 5. And in John 18, it mentions that he was known to the high priest. And it doesn't seem that it was of a priestly family, but it may well be that they had a contract to supply fish for the high priest's household or whatever it may have been. I'm just speculating there. But the Gospel of John tells us that John was known to the high priest.

Probably the youngest of the disciples, and usually with others. And he was evidently a seeking soul. Not every fellow in his late teens or early twenties at most is out there really seeking to get all that he can spiritually. He's really concerned about his own spiritual need and [00:20:03] the spiritual need of the people. John the Baptist was preaching repentance, prepare the way of the Lord. And the disciple John, Apostle John, whatever we want to call him, was one of those who had gone and who evidently had followed John the Baptist. And he's present in chapter one of John's Gospel where we are. He's present at least on the morrow in verse 35. Perhaps he was present the first day in verse 29, where John the Baptist says, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But in verse 35, there's John, two of his disciples looking at Jesus as he walked. He, John the Baptist, said, behold the Lamb of God. And the two disciples heard him speaking and followed Jesus. So by this time, the disciple John, as we'll call him here, was a disciple [00:21:05] of John the Baptist. He had been in earnest about his own spiritual need, his own condition, and he had gone to hear and had given heed to the message that God was giving through this messenger. And now this messenger points him to the Lord Jesus. So the first contact with Jesus that scripture tells us of, now if there was relationship according to the flesh, scripture does not build on it. And we'd better be careful not to do too much building either. It may be that John in some way knew Jesus before. But here, John the Baptist points Jesus out, behold the Lamb of God. First of all, which takes away the sin of the world, then behold the Lamb of God. And that's all that is needed. Now John and Andrew follow Jesus. And John the Baptist later [00:22:05] on, he's faced with the fact that many of his followers were now following Jesus. Jesus was baptizing more than he was baptizing, comes out in chapter three. Actually, Jesus didn't baptize, but his followers baptized those who came. And when John the Baptist is told this bad news by somebody who was perhaps trying to get at him, he took it as good news. And he said, yes, that's good. That's great. He must increase. I must decrease. But this was the initial contact with the Lord Jesus. It seems that after this first contact here in John one and perhaps chapter two, that John may have gone back to the fishing business. We find him, well, there are some of the disciples of the Lord Jesus in chapter two at the wedding [00:23:02] at Cana. Jesus also and his disciples were invited to this marriage. And so, but in Mark chapter one, in Luke chapter five, in Matthew chapter four, I believe it is, we find these disciples called, while they're at the seaside, they're called to follow the Lord Jesus. And this was something more than the initial contact. According to Luke five, the Lord borrowed Peter's boat one day. He knew Peter. He had named Peter. In other words, he had staked out a claim on Peter in John one. But Peter had gone back to his fishing. And one day the Lord comes along, borrows his boat, uses it for a pulpit, and then pays Peter richly, tells Peter to launch out, let down his nets. Peter drops down one net. It's going to prove [00:24:03] really that it's not, it doesn't work, you know, fishing in the daytime. And after all the experience, fisherman had fished all night. So he's not able to haul in all the fish that the Lord sent into that net. And it says, they beckoned to their partners, James and John. They came and my, there was a tremendous load. Both

boats were filled almost so that they were swamped. So they bring them in. And it's at that point, evidently, very shortly after that, that the Lord calls them to be his followers. Mark one doesn't mention the incident with the great catch of fish, but John and James are mending their net. Peter and Andrew have been fishing and the Lord calls them to follow him. The Lord gave them a nickname. He renamed some of his disciples. He nicknamed some of them.

The nickname that he gave to James and John was Boanerges. And that name means sons of thunder.

[00:25:10] And it would seem to describe their character. You know, when we read the writings of John, we don't think of him as a son of thunder, but it comes out in some of the other Gospels. Hot-blooded and jealous by nature. At least that's my conclusion. In Luke 9, we find that John comes to the Lord very perturbed. He says, Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name. And we told him he had to stop because he doesn't follow with us. Mark gives us the same account. And Mark leaves out one word that Luke has. Mark says, John said, you know, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we forbade him because he follows not us. And you can imagine [00:26:04] this young, zealous, hot-headed young man. He's not following with us. He's not following us. He'd better stop. And the Lord rebukes him. A little later on in the chapter, they're going through Samaria on the way up to Jerusalem. The Lord sends some of his disciples ahead to, as we would say, make motel reservations for the group that was coming and register them. And they come to a Samaritan village. And because they're headed for Jerusalem, the Samaritan village says, no room here. No vacancy sign. Gets hung out. And James and John together say to the Lord, and they were right in the area where Elijah had been when the king several times in a row sent a captain of 50 with his 50 soldiers to arrest Elijah. They could probably point to the hill and they could say, Lord, shall we do like Elijah, call down fire from heaven, burn up the works here? You know, from that we conclude that [00:27:07] this is what he was by nature. And where do we start? You know, by nature, we may well be like that. The Lord has to tell them, you don't know what spirit you're of. And he points out that the son of man hadn't come to destroy men's lives, but to save them. And you know, John in his life learns to curb that son of thunder disposition. And eventually he's the disciple whom the Lord can use to write about love and about loving one another. He learned to appreciate the love of the Lord Jesus. At that point where he's ready to call down a fire from heaven to consume the Samaritans. Well, at that point, we don't find him leaning on the bosom of the Lord Jesus, [00:28:01] leaning on his breast. No. No, he was one of the three that the Lord seemed to take with him when he didn't take the whole group. He took usually Peter, James, and John in the mountain of transfiguration when Jairus's daughter was raised and so on. And I put down ambitious and self-confident. We usually think of Peter in that way. But you know, when Peter said that he was, well, if everyone denies you, I won't, it points out so said they all. And somewhat previously when the mother of John James had come to the Lord, really, they put her up to it, her sons. It was their idea. It comes out elsewhere too. Well, Lord, I want you to do me a favor. What's that? Well, when you rule in your kingdom, my one son sits at your right hand and the other son sits at your left hand. In other words, they have number one [00:29:03] and number two spots underneath you and so on. Ambitious, self-confident. The Lord says to those disciples at that time, speaks about the cup which he had to drink. Could they do so? Oh yes, you know, we can. They're quite confident in that. Well, John was learning and we all learn by fits and starts. Intimate with the Lord one day and arguing with his fellow disciples the next day about the place he's going to have. The next section I've headed here, the disciple whom Jesus loved in Luke 22, we find Jesus sending Peter and John to prepare the Passover. We're not told which two disciples got the donkey for the Lord to ride on a few days previous, but in verse 8 of Luke 22, he sent Peter and John saying, go prepare the Passover for us that we may [00:30:07] eat it. And as we

go on through the life of John, we often find him associated with Peter. There's always Peter and John in that case. Later on in this chapter, verse 23, they began to question together among themselves who then it could be of them who was about to do this, that is, betray the Lord. And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be held to be the greatest. So up until the night where the, before the Lord was crucified, they're still arguing which of them should be the greatest. And we don't read, well, that was an argument between Philip and Nathaniel and Thomas, but it just simply says them. John may well have been involved too. And yet the same night, thank God, we find in his gospel in chapter 13 that he's found leaning on the breast of Jesus, [00:31:02] lying in the bosom of Jesus. In John 13, verse 23, there was at the table one of his disciples in the bosom of Jesus, whom Jesus loved. In verse 25, he, leaning on the breast of Jesus, says to him, Lord, who is it? So it's beautiful, and to me it's an encouragement to know that on the very same night where they had been arguing which of them was the greatest, he could be leaning on the bosom, on the breast of the Lord Jesus. And it's a discouragement to realize that on the very night that he's that close to the Lord Jesus, he and the others can still be arguing which of them should be the greatest. But isn't that like ourselves? We learn by fits and starts, and oftentimes those things that are absolutely inconsistent, one with the other, are found side by side in our lives. [00:32:06] At Gethsemane, he's one of the three disciples that the Lord took apart, took them a little further than the others, and asked them to watch with him, one of the three that fell asleep. The other eight, Judas, of course, was out to get the crowd to betray the Lord to them, but the other eight also slept. John was one whom the Lord expected a little more of. John, a few hours before, had been leaning on his breast, had been in his bosom, and yet John, like myself, and I suppose we can say like we all, wasn't able to come up to the Lord's expectations that night. [00:33:01] We read of the disciples when the Lord was betrayed and arrested and submitted to that, when he allowed himself to be led away that they all forsook him and fled. That was the initial reaction. Later on, we find John following, Peter following at a distance. John comes to the high priest's palace. He's known, he's admitted, and then a while later, Peter gets there, and he's at the gate. Well, who are you? Why do you want to come in at this hour of the night? John goes out to the girl at the door, and on John's word, Peter is let in. Peter gets himself into tremendous difficulty, but John apparently witnessed the trial of the Lord Jesus. While we don't read that he stood at his side or that he raised his voice and said, you're doing the wrong thing. This man [00:34:01] is innocent, anything like that. At least he was there, and I'm sure that this in itself was appreciated by the Lord Jesus. At the cross, he's the only disciple mentioned as being at the cross. There were several women, including mother of the Lord Jesus, including John's mother, if Salome was indeed his mother. Mary Magdala, Mary the wife of Clopas, and John. Remember, the Lord Jesus, during those first three hours, turns to his mother and says, probably in some way, I'm not even looking at John. At least John was the only man there. Woman, behold thy son.

And to John, he says, behold thy mother. We read that from that hour, John took Mary to his home and cared for her. If there was relationship according to the flesh, it would be something [00:35:04] more understandable whether there wasn't. I don't want to say for sure, but the Lord could commit his mother to John's care. John rose to the occasion, and this was a responsibility for the rest of her life that John took on himself. We find in John 20, when Mary Magdalene comes with the news of what had happened, Peter and John run to the tomb. John outstrips Peter, gets there first, but Peter, the bold one, actually goes into the tomb and checks things out. And there we read, John mentions about himself in John chapter 20. In verse 8, [00:36:01] then entered in therefore the other disciple also, who came first to the tomb, and he saw and believed. For they had not yet known the scripture that he must rise from among the dead. So this is where John really believes the resurrection. And then we have the experience with one of the ten, where the Lord appears in their midst that evening. Later on in the chapter verse 19, and then a week later, the Lord appears when Thomas is with them also.

And yet in chapter 21, we find that when Peter says, I'm going fishing, John is one of those that says, well, I'm going with you. Six disciples followed Peter at that time, among them both James and John. But he's the first one to detect who the stranger on the shore really is. He says, [00:37:03] it's the Lord. And notice in verse 7 of chapter 21, that disciple therefore whom Jesus loved says to Peter, it is the Lord. He doesn't say it's Jesus, it's the Lord. And at the end of the chapter, he's quietly following. Peter is asking, well, Lord, what about him? And he's actually following. The last part, we may have to take some of that another time, but at Pentecost, he's one of the 120 upon whom the Holy Spirit came. One of those that were together in the upper room there. And when the crowd comes together, wants to know what's happening, we read that Peter standing up with the 11 said, Peter did the preaching that day. The others stood there with him to back him up. And it's beautiful to see from the resurrection of [00:38:03] the Lord Jesus onward, the strife for supremacy, the rivalry among the apostles is gone. From the resurrection, really the ascension of the Lord Jesus in Acts 1, we find a togetherness among the apostles. Well, with Peter, he meets this lame man at the gate. Peter's the one who does the talking, but John is with him. They're working together. In the mouth of two or three witnesses, every matter is to be established. And it's a wonderful thing for two to work together. And John and Peter are working together there. Later on, the apostles send Peter and John to Samaria after Philip has preached there. So the Samaritans have not received the Holy Spirit yet. And Peter and John go and lay hands on them, pray for them, and they receive the Holy Spirit. And I believe in this way, a potential [00:39:02] division among Christians was averted. The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans. The Samaritans, as we saw before, were glad to reciprocate. And, you know, they could have had a Jewish church at Jerusalem, Samaritan church in Samaria, if the Spirit of God hadn't come in in this way, refrained from coming on these Samaritans directly. They needed Peter and John. And Peter and John, John who had asked that he could call fire down from heaven on the Samaritans, had to pray for these Samaritans that they received the Holy Spirit. And we don't find any dimmer on his part at that point. No, this is part of the work the Lord has given him to do. And we find there in Acts 8 that once this has happened, initially to the people that Philip had evangelized, a verse that often is not noticed, verse 25 of Acts 8, they, Peter and John, therefore, having testified and spoken [00:40:06] the word of the Lord, returned to Jerusalem and announced the glad tidings to many villages of the Samaritans. The very people that John was ready to burn up, you know, he had gotten close enough to the Lord that now he evangelizes, helps to evangelize Samaria. His brother, James, is the first of the apostles to lose his life for the Lord's sake. In chapter 12 of the Acts, James is put to death. And after that, of course, it's not James and John anymore. But we read of another James coming into the picture, that James the brother of the Lord Jesus, half-brother. And in Galatians 2, we find that Peter, James, and John, Cephas is the other name used for Peter, Cephas and James and John, are pillars in the assembly at Jerusalem. And it's not that, you know, John [00:41:02] has advanced one notch, the Lord has put James in ahead of him. But it's actually James, Peter, and John, I believe, there in Galatians. John doesn't mind keeping a back seat. And, you know, we appreciate brethren who are like that. And in that chapter, Galatians 2, we find that he's one of these pillars in the assembly at Jerusalem. And these brethren give the right hand of fellowship to Paul and Bantus, as far as the service that God has given them to do. So he's no longer striving for a position for himself. He's ready to recognize the grace of God in others. And service that God has given others who were not part of this select twelve. Not one of those apostles. No, he was one whom the Lord had called in a different way, to a different service. But the right hand of fellowship, it's not we forbade him because he doesn't follow us. No, Paul had a different ministry. But John [00:42:04] would extend the right hand of fellowship to him. Well, ultimately, the Lord uses him to write. And we'll talk about that when we get to the things that he writes. Shall we pray? Gracious God, our Father, we thank thee for thy work in the life of the Apostle John. A young man, early drawn to the Lord Jesus, early exercised about spiritual things, impetuous in seeking a place for himself, and

yet he became an honored servant of thine. One whom thou couldst use to set the Lord Jesus before us. He could write, we have contemplated his glory. He loves to write about the Lord Jesus, loves to share him with others, write so that our joy might be full. Oh, our God and our Father, [00:43:03] we thank thee as we trace how human the Apostle John was and how much he had to learn. And we take a courage because we're very human, we have much to learn too, and we thank thee for thy patience with us. Teach us to enjoy the Lord Jesus, to behold his glory, to contemplate his glory, to think of who he is. And our Father, to have this earnest burning desire to share him with others. Help us too that we may not seek to thrust ourselves into prominence, to take the first place, to do all the talking, but oh...