

You've probably never heard a Christmas message on this passage, but we've come to see that the providence of our Sovereign God is so complete that He orchestrates every detail of life, even things we see as merely coincidental. As a church body we've seen it over and over again, and because of that, I hope you've begun to recognize it in the details of your life. (Psalm 139:16)

Christmas is about God becoming a man and living among us. It sounds like a myth, and it seems so impossible, but this morning, I want us to see what John the Beloved wanted the churches of Asia to really get fixed in their minds. There are those who love the Messiah (Christ) and believe the Gospel and those who don't. There are antichrists and there are children of God. The grace of God can transform antichrists into children of God. (Ephesians 2:3) That was the experience of many of us. Let's allow the passage speak to us about the reality we see in the world around us.

¹ Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. The churches of Asia had lost a number of people to those new movements that combined the latest philosophies, Greek and Roman mythology, along with Jesus. Instead of staying with and believing the account of the apostles who lived with Jesus, some were seduced by the carnal compromises these new ideas offered. Their minds were open, open to what they wanted to hear, but their brains were shut off.

Now you might say that is pretty judgmental of me. The bottom line is that I believe the Scriptures are God's revelation of truth to us, and that is why I come to that conclusion. I don't see any motivation for the Apostles to lie about what they saw and heard. After all, if there were motivation for anything, it would be to water down what Jesus said to keep from being tortured and killed. They certainly weren't getting rich. It was their persecutors that gained financially, not the Apostles. The more we learn about the culture and archeology, the more evidence we have to believe that the Apostles were conveying without distortion exactly what Jesus did and taught.

John is telling us that there is a lot of garbage being spouted by false prophets so we need to test what they are saying. Don't just take it in, but take it to the Word of God. We have a standard. The world has none. To "test" is the word in Greek that metallurgist's used when refining a precious metal. (1Thessalonians 5:21) We need to burn off what isn't true in what we hear. We must see if there is any valuable substance that remains. (1Corinthians 3:12)

Today we hear that our own heart or feeling should be the standard. Yikes! The Bible says our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked. (Jeremiah 17:9)

Commented [notes1]: 16 your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.
Psalms 139:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.
Eph 2:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: 21 Test everything. Hold on to the good.
1 Thess 5:21 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: 13 his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.
1 Cor 3:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: 9 The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?
Jer 17:9 (NIV)

Today our society says pedophilia is wrong. What will it say tomorrow? It once said the murder of babies in the womb was wrong. Today it says it all depends on the mother's preference. Now it can be partially born and killed. What's next? We have a standard, thank God, and it isn't about what I feel at the moment, it's the unchanging Word of God. (Isaiah 40:8)

Commented [notes6]: 8 The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." Isaiah 40:8 (NIV)

John tells us we better test the spirits because there are a lot of false prophets running around. How? ² *This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,* Merry Christmas! The anointed salvation of God (Jesus Christ) came in the flesh in the little grotto cave in Bethlehem. There, that is how you know. Immanuel, God with us! (Matthew 1:23) Do you believe it? To "acknowledge" in its Greek form is "to say the same thing". Do you say the same thing as the declaration of God's Word? Then you are from God. This is another of John's many tests to assure us of our salvation.

Commented [notes7]: 23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel!" --which means, "God with us." Matt 1:23 (NIV)

The Greek for "has come in the flesh" is in the perfect tense which emphasizes that Jesus was born and remains a physical being. It would be better translated as Christ who "is come, who came and who is in the flesh". This was a refuting of the teaching of Cerinthus who believed the Christ Spirit left Jesus before the crucifixion. Christians need to understand that Jesus did not leave his physical body behind at the resurrection or the ascension. The scars are forever there as the sign of the payment for our sins. After the resurrection, Jesus declared that He still has flesh and bone. (Luke 24:39)

Commented [notes8]: Alexander Ross, *New International Commentary*, The Epistles of James and John p. 197
cf. Westminster Shorter Catechism

This acknowledgement we make is not just to agree to the facts, as the demons know this is true and will say so. (Mark 1:24; 3:11) But it is to accept it and declare it with joy, bringing glory to God. That is something the demons and the unredeemed cannot do. (Psalm 148:13)

Commented [notes9]: 39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." Luke 24:39 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 24 "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are--the Holy One of God!" Mark 1:24 (NIV)

In our lifetime there have been several major efforts to attack this essential truth. The first one I can recall is the attack on Isaiah 7:14 "a virgin will conceive..." There was a big effort to say that the word virgin just meant a young woman. It can mean that, but it can also mean virgin. How would it be the sign from God if a young woman got pregnant and had a son? How desperate some can be to deny Jesus is the Lord. And the next verse will tell you what it really is.

Commented [notes11]: 11 Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God." Mark 3:11 (NIV)

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The other more recent attack has been on the Bethlehem birth. These "scholars" like Luke the best, but completely dismiss his claim that the holy family went to Bethlehem. There hasn't been an historical record discovered of that census around 4 or 5 BC when Jesus was born, so they assume it was made up to fit the prophecy. We'll guess how many other things they said the same thing about and eventually archeology proved the Bible right. You'd think they'd learn from their past mistakes. We know those kind of censuses did take place on a regular

Commented [notes13]: 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14 (NIV)

basis. It's all an effort to say that God did not come in the flesh and fulfill hundreds of incredible prophecies, because then we'd be accountable and have to bow our knee and change our life. That's the real issue.

Here is what John calls these fanciful attempts. ³ *but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.* Antichrist, that is, opposed to or a replacement for Christ. Remember why John is so adamant about it? He was an eyewitness! Try to tell him Jesus wasn't God in the flesh born in Bethlehem fulfilling the prophecies. Good luck. He knew Mary. He knew she was not a liar. He saw Jesus walking on water! He saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead. He heard Him say, "I and my Father are one." (John 10:30) He saw Him transfigured on the mountain. He saw Him alive after the crucifixion, and he saw Him ascend into heaven! Try and tell John Jesus didn't come in the flesh!

Commented [notes14]: 30 I and the Father are one." John 10:30 (NIV)

John declares that we can know where people are coming from with this simple test. Just ask or listen to what they teach to see if they believe Jesus was sent by God to be our Savior. Did He physically come into the world and die for us? Those who deny all the evidence of the Gospel record, the millions of changed lives, the good that the Gospel has done in the world (and oh is that under attack with distortion and omission) are of the antichrist spirit. They are enemies of the cross. (Philippians 3:18)

Commented [notes15]: 18 For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Phil 3:18 (NIV)

What did Jesus say should be our response to our enemies? Love them! (Luke 6:27-28) Love them so that they might become children of God. Love them so that the lies they have been taught about Jesus will be overcome with truth.

Commented [notes16]: 27 "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Luke 6:27-28 (NIV)

What happened that night in Bethlehem is truly amazing! The full implications of that story have to be understood in the cultural setting. According to some, those fields around Bethlehem had become the fields of Levite shepherds. They were priests in training. Why? Because of the proximity to Jerusalem, and the thousands of sheep required for sacrifice, Levites raised unblemished sheep there. Nothing but the perfectly flawless could be used. These Levites would later work in the Temple as those who examined the sheep and gave approval or rejected the sheep that were brought as offerings, so shepherding was their initial training.

When a ewe was about to give birth, they would bring her into the room on the lower floor of the watchtower Migdal Eder. As soon as the lamb was born, they would wrap it in strips of salted cloth to protect it from injury and place it in the manger until it calmed down and was used to being out of the womb.

Suddenly, there was an angel in the sky announcing the birth of the Savior. (Luke 2:9) I know we have talked in the past about how shepherds were the

Commented [notes17]: 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. Luke 2:9 (NIV)

lowly despised class of people, and that was generally true, but if indeed these were Levites, as some extra biblical writings indicate, then these men knew the Scriptures. "Good news for all people" would remind them of the promises that Messiah would have converts from the whole Gentile world. (Isaiah 49:6) When the angel said, "the Savior is born in the city of David, Christ the Lord," (Luke 2:11) they would have instantly thought of all the prophetic Scriptures about the coming of Messiah. (Micah 5:2)

Commented [notes18]: 6 he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." Isaiah 49:6 (NIV)

Then the angel told them they would find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Their minds had to go into overload. That is how they cared for sacrificial lambs. Was this God's lamb, God's provision for sin? The sky was filled with an angel choir giving glory to God and announcing peace was with God was available to mankind. (Luke 2:14) No wonder the shepherd priests felt they had to tell everyone. No wonder a great number of them were converted after the resurrection. (Acts 6:7)

Commented [notes19]: 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. Luke 2:11 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: 2 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." Micah 5:2 (NIV)

Who are these that so desperately try to insist all this never happened? They are antichrist. They want to be their own lord. It's the bah-humbug spirit that is afraid it might cost them something to believe. How many are truly struggling to believe and claim it's because they don't see miracles every day, and what percentage of unbelievers just don't want to believe because they don't want to pay the price? Only God knows, but I'm guessing the cost factor plays a bigger role in unbelief. (Luke 14:28)

Commented [notes21]: 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." Luke 2:14 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Acts 6:7 (NIV)

Look at the world around you, especially with modern scientific discovery and tell me miracles are impossible! The so-called "junk DNA" that scientists thought was proof of Darwinian evolution is now understood to be a marvelous instruction system. That it happened by accident is as much a miracle as to say God designed it. Any way you look at it, the physical world is full of miracles. Dr. Ravi Zacharius says it takes more faith today to believe that the world is all a super accident than it does to believe in a Creator. So what is going on in the heart of the unbeliever?

Commented [notes23]: 28 "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? Luke 14:28 (NIV)

But ⁴ You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. You overcome their false teaching with faith. You overcome their animosity with love. And even when you are persecuted you rejoice because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you! The world needs to see overcoming Christians that actually live their faith. Since the story of the manger is real, since God came in the flesh and showed us how to live, since He died for our sins and conquered death, how should we be living today? (2 Peter 3:11) What hope and joy should be ours! We should be overcomers, unaffected by all the false teachings that are popular in every culture! Something is very wrong if we aren't.

Commented [notes24]: 11 Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives 2 Peter 3:11 (NIV)

⁵ *They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.* As illogical and incoherent as the world's arguments are, the world accepts them because the world wants to remain lord over their own lives. They don't want anyone to call sin what it really is. "After all," they say, "how could it be rebellion against god when I am god?" And that makes perfect sense to the world because that is what they want to believe. False teaching will always be popular because it satisfies the fallen nature. The cross and death to self to serve others will always be unpopular. (Matthew 7:13)

Commented [notes25]: 13 "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. Matt 7:13 (NIV)

Some of us get very upset with some of the things broadcast on TV, but consider this. The world listens to the world. Overcomers reject the world's warped, self-centered perspective. We die to our self to serve God and others. (1Corinthians 15:31)

Commented [notes26]: 31 I die every day--I mean that, brothers--just as surely as I glory over you in Christ Jesus our Lord. 1 Cor 15:31 (NIV)

On the other hand, those who are from God will receive the truth of the Gospel. They will hear your testimony. They will contemplate the wonders of creation. They will see the amazing fulfillment of prophecy. ⁶ *We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.* You can recognize those who are not of God by their false beliefs and their character that accepts those beliefs. The Spirit of truth helps us discern. (John 16:13) So don't waste your time with those who are refusing to hear. Wait until there is some openness. Wait until you see the Spirit of God breaking down the walls of resistance. Then, gently and lovingly share the truth you have found. (Jude 3) Share the wonder of the manger, the Lamb of God who came as good news for all people. The Word brings conviction to those who will receive it and who don't resist it for selfish reasons. Preach the word and let the Holy Spirit convict. You never need to be shy about the declaration of the Word of truth. (1Peter 3:15)

Commented [notes27]: 13 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. John 16:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes28]: 3 Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. Jude 1:3 (NIV)

I've had a fresh demonstration of this while playing Simeon in Pilgrimage to Bethlehem. When I try to share the prophecies with tourists some are eager to hear and call their friends to listen. Others don't want to hear a word of it. The contrast is like night and day!

Commented [notes29]: 15 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 1 Peter 3:15 (NIV)

This is the real Christmas Spirit: Jesus, the Son of God, born in a manger in Bethlehem, came to defeat the works of the devil! (1John 3:8) He came to redeem us from our sins and shine the light of truth in this dark world. (John 12:46) He is the incarnation of the very Word of God. (John 1:14) All who reject Him are antichrist. Those who receive Him are born again to new life of love and self-sacrifice. That's the real Christmas Spirit. Accept no substitutes!

Commented [notes30]: 8 He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. 1 John 3:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes31]: 46 I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. John 12:46 (NIV)

Commented [notes32]: 14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14 (NIV)