

Main Idea: When we take a fresh look at Christmas from the perspective of 1 John 1:1-4, we discover three truths about the message of Christmas.

- I. The message of Christmas is historical (1).
 - A. Jesus is the One from the beginning.
 - B. Jesus is the Word of life.
 1. He is the true God.
 2. He is the true man.
- II. The message of Christmas is personal (2).
 - A. A real person appeared.
 1. He left the Father.
 2. He revealed Himself to us.
 - B. A real person appeared to real people.
 1. We have seen Him.
 2. We testify concerning Him.
- III. The message of Christmas is practical (3-4).
 - A. It produces fellowship.
 1. It makes us partners with each other.
 2. It makes us partners with God.
 - B. It produces joy.

A concluding question: Do you believe this message?

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-20

No doubt you’ve heard the story of Idaho Pastor Saeed Abedini. This will be his third Christmas separated from his family. He’s locked up in a prison in Iran. Abedini is an American citizen serving an eight year sentence after an Iranian court found him guilty of trying to establish a network of churches in private homes. His family claims he’s being persecuted for converting to Christianity.

According to the American Center for Law & Justice, an advocacy group campaigning for Abedini’s release, Abedini has been severely beaten inside his prison and is in need of urgent medical care.

This past Wednesday the *Huffington Post*² recorded our brother’s Christmas letter. I’d like to read it as we begin this Christmas message.

Rajai Shahr Prison 2014

Merry Christmas!

These days are very cold here. My small space beside the window is without glass making most nights unbearable to sleep. The treatment by fellow prisoners is also quite cold and at times hostile. Some of my fellow prisoners don’t like me because I am a convert and a pastor. They look at me with shame as someone who has betrayed his former religion. The guards can’t even stand the paper cross that I have made and hung next to me as a sign of my faith and in anticipation of celebrating my Savior’s birth. They have threatened me and forced me to remove it. This is the first Christmas that I am completely without my family; all of my family is presently outside of the country. These conditions have made this upcoming Christmas season very hard, cold and shattering for me. It appears that I am alone with no one left beside me.

These cold and brittle conditions have made me wonder why God chose the hardest time of the year to become flesh and why He came to the earth in the weakest human condition (as a baby). Why did God

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see a message preached at WBC on 12/21/97.

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/17/saeed-abedini-christmas-letter_n_6338304.html

choose the hardest place to be born in the cold weather? Why did God choose to be born in a manger in a stable, which is very cold, filthy and unsanitary with an unpleasant smell? Why did the birth have to be in such a way that it was not only hard physically, but also socially? It must have brought such shame for Mary and her fiancé that she was pregnant before marriage in the religious society of that time.

Dear sisters and brothers, the fact of the Gospel is that it is not only the story of Jesus, but it is the key of how we are to live and serve like Jesus. Today we like Him should come out of our safe comfort zone in order to proclaim the Word of Life and Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and the penalty of sin that He paid on the cross and to proclaim His resurrection. We should be able to tolerate the cold, the difficulties and the shame in order to serve God. We should be able to enter into the pain of the cold dark world. Then we are able to give the fiery love of Christ to the cold wintry manger of those who are spiritually dead. It might be necessary to come out of the comfort of our lives and leave the loving embrace of our family to enter the manger of the lives of others, such as it has been for me for the third consecutive Christmas. It may be that we will be called fools and traitors and face many difficulties, but we should crucify our will and wishes even more until the world hears and tastes the true meaning of Christmas.

Christmas means that God came so that He would enter your hearts today and transform your lives and to replace your pain with indescribable joy.

Christmas is the manifestation of the radiant brightness of the Glory of God in the birth of a child named Emmanuel, which means God is with us.

Christmas is the day that the heat of the life-giving fire of God's love shone in the dark cold wintry frozen hearts and burst forth in this deadly wicked world.

The same way that the heat from the earth's core melts the hard stones in itself and produces lava, the fiery love of God, Jesus Christ, through the virgin Mary's womb came to earth on Christmas to melt the hard heart of sin and wickedness of the world and removes them from our life. In the same process, the work of the Holy Spirit is a fiery rain of God's Holiness and Mercy that flows into our body, soul and spirit and brings the light of Christ into us and through us making this dark, cold, wintry world into radiant burning brightness. He is turning our world into a world full of peace, joy, and love that is so different than the dark, cold, and wintry world that we used to live in. Hallelujah!

So this Christmas let the lava-like love of Christ enter into the depth of your heart and make you fiery, ready to pay any cost in order to bring the same lava love to the cold world around you, transforming them with the true message of Christmas.

Pastor Saeed Abedini

Soaking in the lava love of Christ

What a challenging letter! We should pray for our brother and his wife and the thousands of other pastors and wives they represent who are incarcerated for Christ all over the world.

We should also take heed to his closing charge. *Be ready to pay any cost to bring the same lava love to the cold world, transforming them with the true message of Christmas.*

What can transform this world? Only the *true* message of Christmas.

What is the true message of Christmas? I fear many don't know, even many who think they know.

Which is what this message is all about. In previous years, I've preached the Christmas story from a variety of perspectives. We've looked at Christmas from Luke's perspective in Luke 2, and Matthew's perspective in Matthew 1. One year we examined Christmas through the eyes of Joseph, another year through the eyes of Simeon, and still

another through the eyes of the magi. One year we did a series on Christ from the viewpoint of the Old Testament prophets. A couple of years ago, we looked at the songs of Christmas in Luke 1-2.

This year I want to take you to what at first may not seem like a Christmas text, but indeed is a powerful one. We're going to take a fresh look at Christmas from the perspective of one of Jesus' followers, the apostle John.

"Why John?" you ask. For several reasons. John was one of Jesus' closest followers. He was an eyewitness of Jesus' life. He may even have been a first cousin to Jesus (based on the assumption that his mother was Salome, possibly a sister of Mary).

Ironically, though John wrote a gospel, he didn't record the birth story. He didn't need to, since Matthew and Luke already had. Instead, John began his biography of Jesus by focusing on the theological significance of Jesus' incarnation.

"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)."

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John penned those words around the year 85 A.D., the year he wrote his gospel. But it's not his gospel we want to consider this morning. It's a letter he wrote *after* his gospel. We call it 1 John.

You see, our generation isn't the first one to struggle with confusion about Jesus. There were deceptive critics of the true Jesus in John's day, and somewhere between the years 85-95, John wrote a letter to help the true Christ-followers deal with the problem.

John was an old man when he wrote 1 John. He'd lived through some sixty "Christmases" since he saw Jesus return to heaven. And in this letter, John offers us the fresh perspective on Christmas we so desperately need today. When we look at Christmas from the perspective of John in 1 John 1:1-4, we discover three truths about the message of Christmas.

I. The message of Christmas is historical (1).

John begins his letter (1), "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."

Though scholars believe John sent this epistle to Christians living in the province of Asia (modern Turkey), John doesn't identify himself nor his readers. He gets down to business from the very first word. He wants to talk about the historical Jesus.

Remember, John is writing to people like us, people who had never personally seen Jesus as he had. He teaches us two things about Jesus in verse 1.

A. Jesus is the One from the beginning. "That which was from the beginning." If you are familiar at all with the Bible, you'll notice this phrase parallels the beginning of two other books. "In the *beginning*, God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1)." And, "In the *beginning* was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1)."

John begins this letter, "That which was from the beginning," indicating he has in mind the same person Moses did in Genesis, and he himself did when he penned his gospel--*Jesus*. Jesus is the one from the beginning.

But notice he says "that which," not "the One who" was from the beginning. It's a neuter pronoun. Commentator Gary Burge observes (53), "Neuter pronouns can function comprehensively to cover the person, words and works." John is going to lay before us the significance of the whole sweep of Jesus' life.

"What qualified John to do that?" you may wonder. Good question. Notice the four credentials he gives: "Which we have *heard*, which we have *seen* with our eyes, which we have *looked* at and our hands have *touched*."

Don't miss that. We're not talking about *The Hobbit* or some other fictitious story. Christianity rests upon a historical, documented foundation. There were real people who heard, saw, looked at, and even touched Jesus. And John was just one of them. He says "we" did, a reference to the apostles who spent three years observing the Lord, the One who was from the beginning.

John teaches us something else about Jesus at the outset.

B. Jesus is the Word of life. Verse 1 concludes, "This we proclaim concerning the Word of life." Actually, there is no main verb in the Greek text until verse 3. Commentator C. H. Dodd calls these four verses a "grammatical tangle," for John piles phrase upon phrase about Jesus, which he will later unpack in his letter.

John refers to Jesus "the Word of life." Why that description? You might answer, "Because that's the way John referred to Jesus when he began his gospel in John 1. 'In the beginning was the Word (John 1:1).'" True, but why doesn't John just call Him by His historical name, "Jesus"? Why does he refer to Him as the "Word of life"?

Actually, the title communicates two bottom line realities pertaining to Jesus.

1. *He is the true God.* He is "the Word," the One who created all things. And...

2. *He is the true man.* If you had pinched baby Jesus, He would have cried.

Don't be misled by the artist's renditions of baby Jesus with a halo over His head.

What do we communicate with? *Words.* "Word" speaks of revelation. When God wanted to communicate with this world, how did He do it? What language did He use? He did it with *The Word*.

Jesus is the Word of life. He is the Living One who has life in Himself. He is life and He gives life. He's the true God and the true man.

But not everyone believed that in John's day, nor of course, do they in ours. One of the most dangerous heresies in the first two centuries of the Church was Gnosticism.³ People who believed in Gnosticism assumed that the body was evil, and only the spirit is good. For them, salvation is the escape from the body, something that's achieved not by faith in Christ but by special knowledge (the Greek word for "knowledge" is *gnosis*, hence Gnosticism).

Follow carefully. Since the gnostics believed the body was evil, they denied the humanity of Jesus. Some said Jesus only *seemed* to have a body (later called *Docetism*, from the Greek word "to seem"). Others said that the divine Christ joined the human Jesus at his baptism and left him before he died (called *Cerinthianism*, named after its most prominent spokesman, Cerinthus).

So Gnosticism denied the Incarnation.

Is that a problem? John says it is. In fact, the Spirit of God says it is, for He directed John to address it head-on in this letter.

Perhaps you're thinking, "Seems sort of technical to me, even hair-splitting. What difference does it make, as long as you believe in Jesus?"

The issue is, *what* Jesus? John is very clear about who Jesus is, for there is only one Jesus that can save a sinner. He must be both God and man. It's the historical, God-man that changed John's life.

³NIV Study Bible, p. 1905.

Beloved, the message of Christmas is, first of all, *historical*. Ponder the evidence in front of you. John says, "We *heard* Him!" But that's not enough, since lots of people have claimed to hear messages from God. "We've *seen* Him." That's more compelling. But to have *touched* Jesus was conclusive proof of the Incarnation, that God really had become a man.

The verb "touched" ("handled" in KJV) indicates more than a momentary contact. It means "to grope or feel after in order to find." It's what you do when you're in your dark basement feeling the wall for the light-switch. It's the idea of "examining closely." Which is precisely what John did with Jesus.

Several years ago we were visiting my parents when two people knocked at the front door. They handed us a pamphlet entitled, "Why You Can Believe the Bible." I scanned it and discovered yet another modern day version of gnosticism, for in essence the tract said, "Jesus was not God, and don't believe anyone who says He was."

That includes John, I suppose, since John clearly taught that Jesus is 100% God and 100% man. From John's perspective, the message of Christmas is historical.

Having said that, it's not just a historical message. According to John, secondly...

II. The message of Christmas is personal (2).

How so? In two ways, according to John.

A. A real person appeared. "The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us (2)." John says, "The life appeared," or as the AV puts it, "The life was manifested." In the AV, verse 2 is a parentheses, explaining how "that which was from the beginning" could have been "heard, seen, and touched." Verse 2 tells us a real person appeared.

How did it happen? John tells us two things about this person.

1. *He left the Father.* The text says, "The life (that's Jesus) appeared (that's a reference to the Incarnation)." Then at the end of the verse John specifically states that the One who appeared was "with the Father" before He came. In heaven.

Can you imagine that? The One who appeared chose to leave the intimate, loving company of His Father to come to this fragmented, sin-infested world (see Phil. 2:5-8). The next time you look at a manger scene, remember what Jesus *left* to come here. He left the Father. Then...

2. *He revealed Himself to us.* This is mind-boggling. John says "the One who was with the Father has appeared to us." Staggering. The eternal invaded the temporal. God showed up. The King of the universe paid a visit.

He came in splendor, right? He arrived in majesty, right? When He appeared, the world applauded, right? Wrong, wrong, wrong.

Hardly anyone even knew. Only Mary and Joseph, a few shepherds, and later the magi. There was no fanfare, no V.I.P. welcome, no red-carpet treatment. To state the obvious, this world didn't give God's Son the welcome He deserved when He came.

You say, "Well, if I'd have lived then, and I had known, I would have welcomed Him." Really? You live now, and you know now. What kind of welcome are you giving Him now? Are you giving Him the place He deserves in your life now?

You see, the message of Christmas is historical, yes, but it's also personal. A real person appeared. Someone who loves us more than we'll ever know. Someone who knew our plight as sinners under the sentence of God's wrath. A real person appeared.

But that's not all, according to John.

B. A real person appeared to real people. Listen to John again, "The life appeared, and *we* have seen it and testify to it, and *we* proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared *to us*."

If you think Christianity is merely a matter of going through some religious motions (like coming to church, reading your Bible, and being kind to your neighbor), you've missed it. John makes it clear that Christianity is highly personal. It's a relationship between the Person of Jesus and real people, including *us*.

Do you know Jesus *personally*? That's the question.

John did. Notice how he describes his involvement with "The Life" that appeared. He says...

1. *We have seen Him.* You say, "But we can't see Jesus." And you are right. We are not apostles. But John did, because He was. And so did other apostles.

And what did God lead these eye-witnesses to do? John tells us.

First, he says, we have *seen* Him. Secondly...

2. *We testify concerning Him.* At first, they spread the message by word of mouth. They preached all over the known world. Then later the Holy Spirit guided them to write it down. Why? So those who *didn't* see Him could know the truth about Him. That means that today, we have the written record of their testimony of Jesus' life.

There's a lesson here, and let it sink in. John says if we know Christ we have a responsibility to *proclaim* Christ. The fact that God has come to this world is a message that those who believe it must herald to others.

My friend, if you know Jesus, you have an obligation. You are a privileged person, for many in this world don't know what the Incarnation is all about. But you do. *We* do. So it's our job to spread the word about the Word to the world!

Like John did. Like Saeed is doing.

But I must warn you. If you do, it will cost you. John was boiled in a cauldron of oil and placed in exile because he proclaimed Christ. And he's the only apostle that died a natural death. The other eleven were martyred. Making Christ known is costly.

But what cost can compare with what Christ paid for us? The Life appeared. What did He do once He appeared? Read John's Gospel and you'll see what He did. Ultimately, He who is the Life died the death we deserved, and then on the third day, rose from the dead.

So the message of Christmas is first, *historical*, then secondly, *personal*. Thirdly...

III. The message of Christmas is practical (3-4).

This is no mere *child's* story. When properly understood, the message of Christmas produces two practical results.

A. It produces fellowship. "We proclaim [there's the main verb of verses 1-3] to you what we have seen and heard, so that [here's are the results] you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ."

Here's the first result, or by-product, of the message of Christ. Fellowship. Our English word means "friendly, social interaction." So a group of people get together for pizza, play a game together, and say as they're leaving, "What a great time of fellowship!"

But that's not what John has in mind when he uses the term. The Greek word, *koinonia*, means "partnership." Do you know how powerful the message of the Incarnation is? It's so powerful that when it's received, it produces a partnership on two levels.

1. *It makes us partners with each other.* John writes, "That ye also may have fellowship with us." We live in a broken world. People are isolated and alienated. We can sing about "Peace on Earth," but we can't produce peace.

What can? What is it that can bring people together? What can reunite a broken family? What can restore a marriage that's gone sour? Here's the answer. This message can.

The gospel brings together people who previously were enemies. It's true. John says a direct result of belief in Jesus is fellowship with others who believe in Him. The gospel brings people together. It makes us partners with each other.

That's what makes Church so important. You may be thinking, "But do I really need the Church? I mean, I have Christ, and Christ is all I need." While that's true, so is this. John says that believing in Christ is supposed to lead to this result, *so that you may have fellowship with us.*

Why is fellowship with a local church so important? Because you can't see Christ, but you can see His Body. His Body is the Church. He makes Himself known in and through the Church.

"Yea, if the Church wasn't so full of problems, maybe."

Actually, through the Church *with* all its problems. Look at the churches in the New Testament. What do you see? Problems! And *Christ.*

The message of Christmas produces a fellowship. First, with each other. But that's not all. According to John...

2. *It makes us partners with God.* "And truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ."

There's lots of talk in our day about "God" in the generic. John's not talking about a generic God, is he? He says that those who embrace the true message of Christmas experience a partnership, first with God the Father, and secondly with His Son, Jesus the Christ.

They are one, yes. But they're also unique persons, and we are partners with each.

There's a great New Year's resolution. Get to know the persons of the Triune God better in 2015. Because of the gospel message, we have fellowship with each person.

But there's more, a second result. Not just fellowship, but the gospel...

B. It produces joy. Notice verse 4, "We write this to make our joy complete." Please don't confuse the order here. *Proclamation* leads to *fellowship* which leads to *joy*. There can be no real joy until we experience fellowship with God and His Son, and then with His children.

Perhaps you're wondering, "How can I have joy in my life, I mean *real joy*?" John's answer is quite simple. "We write *this* to make our joy complete."

So make sure you have fellowship with God, and with God's people, and you will have joy.

In his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey tells about a British conference on comparative religions. Experts from all over the world came together to debate whether any one belief was unique to the Christian faith.

Yancey writes,⁴ "They began eliminating the possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room.

⁴taken from promotional pamphlet of the book by Yancey, p. 3.

'What's the rumpus about?' he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. In his forthright manner Lewis responded, 'Oh, that's easy. It's grace.'

After some discussion, the conferees had to agree. The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of *karma*, the Jewish covenant, and Muslim code of law--each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional."

All because of the Christ of Christmas. You see, through Jesus we enjoy fellowship and joy. It's ours because of what He did for us, *without* any contribution from us.

That, my friend, is what John says Christmas is all about. It's *historical*--Jesus is the One from the beginning; He's the Word of life. It's *personal*--a real person appeared, and He appeared to real people. And it's *practical*--it produces fellowship and joy.

Back in 1865 William Dix wrote the following:

*What Child is this who, laid to rest
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
Haste, haste, to bring Him laud,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.*

*Why lies He in such mean estate,
Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christians, fear, for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
The cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.*

*So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh,
Come peasant, king to own Him;
The King of kings salvation brings,
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.
Raise, raise a song on high,
The virgin sings her lullaby.
Joy, joy for Christ is born,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.*

This is the message of Christmas. So let me ask you a concluding question. *Do you believe this message?* Believe. That's the necessary response. Put your full weight upon. Trust in. Demonstrate faith in. *Believe* the message.

If you do believe it, then affirm it and enter into the fullness of its benefits, fellowship and joy. If you don't, why not? Have you ever investigated the historicity of the message of Christ? I urge you to invite John the apostle (and the other eyewitnesses) to show you what they have heard and seen and touched. Study their records, and by the grace of God become a true believer in the message of Christmas.

Closing Song (#137): *What Child Is This?*