

Christmas Message (2019)

Introduction

I want to start out by saying that I'm not standing here to entertain anyone or make anyone "feel good." But neither am I standing here to bore you or make anyone feel depressed. By God's grace, I want to speak the truth to you – the truth about your own eternal well-being – and also mine, no matter who we are.

Words are an amazing thing, aren't they? By stringing together a collection of words in a certain order I can take "invisible" thoughts and feelings and ideas that I have and communicate those to you. Just like I'm doing now. With words, I can take invisible thoughts and feelings and ideas and make them, as it were, visible. So words are a way of revealing ourselves – of letting someone else know who we are. But even without words—even if I was mute—you could still learn something about me because you can see me right in front of you. If you observed me carefully you could learn things about me just from seeing my facial expressions, my body language, and the things that I do and don't do.

I. God is Invisible

So what about God? Have any of you ever seen God? Seriously. Does God physically walk around among us so we can watch and observe him and come to conclusions of our own about who He is and what He's like? The answer to those questions should be obvious. Not a one of us here has ever seen—much less *observed*—God. The Bible itself says that God is "invisible" and that no one has ever seen *or can see* God. The Apostle Paul writes:

- 1 Timothy 1:17 — To the King of the ages, immortal, *invisible*, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.
- 1 Timothy 6:15–16 — He [is the one] whom no one has ever seen or can see.

The Apostle John says very simply:

- 1 John 4:12 — No one has ever seen God.

II. What humans conclude from the invisibility of God

Have you ever really thought about the practical implications of this – of a God who can't be seen? Many people conclude from this that God doesn't exist – at least not for any practical purposes. Their unspoken motto could be summed up like this: "Out of sight, out of mind." We may not identify ourselves "officially" as atheists, but we can still live practically as atheists – even professing Christians. Believing that God exists, but then failing to live my life with God as its ultimate point of reference is still the same thing as saying in my heart: "There is no God" (Ps. 14:1) – not practically speaking, not in the sense that it really matters to the daily living of my life.

There are others who go in a very different direction. They conclude from the fact that no one has ever seen or observed God that we're free to imagine God however we want – according to our own feelings or ideas of what we think He should be. So we imagine God as a benevolent Santa Claus who wouldn't hurt a fly. Or we imagine Him as a harsh judge just watching for an opportunity to strike with lightning. Or we imagine God as always condemning or excusing only the things that *we* would condemn or excuse. After all, if no man has ever seen God or can see God what other choice do we have than practical atheism on the one hand (“out of sight, out of mind”) or a self-made, imagined “god” on the other? How can we truly know anything at all about a God that we cannot see? How can we “know” (relationally) a God who is invisible? In light of how we began this message, you may already be thinking of an answer. But first, let's ask ourselves another question.

III. Why should God be invisible?

“Why *should* God be invisible?” Isn't that just a convenient excuse to believe in anything we want to – invisible friends, invisible pets, invisible worlds? Not at all! There's nothing in the definition of a “pet” that demands that that pet be invisible. But God is, *by “definition,”* invisible. Jesus said in John's Gospel:

□ John 4:24 — *God is spirit*, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

Perhaps something that a man named R.C. Sproul said might help us understand better: “God is immaterial in his being. He has no extension that can be measured with a ruler or weighed on a scale. Because his being is unextended, immaterial, and spiritual, God is invisible” (Sproul). Connected with this spirituality and invisibility of God is His omnipresence. In other words, God is present everywhere with His whole being. We read in the prophet Jeremiah:

□ Jeremiah 23:24 — Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD.

We're not to think of God as an immense physical being filling the heavens and the earth so that part of Him is here on earth and part of Him is far off in another galaxy or so that there's no “room” for anything else. Instead, God is a spirit without any “parts” who is present everywhere with His whole being. When King Solomon was about to begin building the temple in Jerusalem, he asked:

□ 2 Chronicles 2:6 — Who is able to build [God] a house, since heaven, even highest heaven, cannot contain him? Who am I to build a house for him, except as a place to make offerings before him?

And then we remember these well-known words of the psalmist:

□ Psalms 139:7–10 — Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I

take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.

There's one other reason why God should be "invisible." The Apostle Paul says of God:

□ 1 Timothy 6:15–16 — He [is the one who]... dwells *in unapproachable light*, whom no one has ever seen or can see.

We cannot see God not only because He's an invisible spirit, but because He dwells in unapproachable light. The Lord said simply to Moses: "man shall not see me and live" (Exod. 33:20). Why should God be "invisible"? Because He isn't like us. Because He's not limited in any way like us. Because His glory is infinite. Why should God be invisible? Because He is God.

Now we've just been saying a lot of things *about* this *invisible* God that we've never seen, haven't we? Are you feeling how ludicrous that might seem? How can we know or say anything at all about a God who is invisible to us – a God that none of us has ever seen or can see?

IV. The invisible God is by nature "self-revealing"

Here, now, is a wonderful mystery. The God who is invisible—whom no man has ever seen or can see—this is also a God who *by His very nature reveals Himself*. God is **by His very nature self-revealing**. Let me say now that for some, this amazing reality is good news – a "fragrance from life to life"; for others, this very same reality will be a "fragrance from death to death" (2 Cor. 2:15-16). Which will it be for you?

How can the invisible God also be, by His very nature, self-revealing? Listen to these words from the Gospel of John:

□ John 1:1–2 — In the beginning was **the Word**, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

We remember that with words, we can take invisible thoughts and feelings and ideas and make them, as it were, visible. With words, we can take things hidden in the darkness, as it were, and bring them out into the light of day. Words, for us, are a means of revealing ourselves – of letting someone else "see" who we are. And now we read, "In the beginning **was the Word**"! In other words, in the beginning, the Word *already was*. So this Word is eternal. "And the Word was *with* God." That word for "with" emphasizes an intimacy of communion and even a oneness between the Word and God ("the Word was *with* God"), and yet it also reveals that there is a real distinction between the Word and God ("the Word was *with God*"). Who is it that speaks, as it were, the Word? It is God. God "speaks" the Word. And yet we can't think of God speaking this Word just like we speak words. God is a spirit, and a spirit doesn't have lungs or vocal chords like we do. This "Word" of God isn't just a sound carried on airwaves, but an eternal personal being – "In the beginning *was* the Word, and [this] Word was *with* God." The Word that God "speaks" has been eternally "with God" in intimate fellowship and communion.

Are you seeing what we mean, now, when we say that the invisible God, by His very nature, is a God who speaks – a God who reveals Himself in this eternal “Word”? But in order for this Word to truly reveal God, then this Word must also *be* God, because only God can reveal God. Only one who is God can be said in any true sense to reveal God – that God whom no man has ever seen or can see. So John writes: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, *and the Word was God.*” There are mysteries here far beyond our finding out. But this much we can know: God is not silent. Instead, He is a God who speaks. He is, by His very nature, self-revealing. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”

V. We are surrounded by the self-revelation of God

Did you notice the emphasis on the Word being “in the beginning” with God? Are you reminded of the Bible’s very first words?

□ Genesis 1:1 — In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

And how did God create the heavens and the earth? By His *word*. Ten times in the first chapter of the Bible we read these words: “And God *said*...” As just one example:

□ Genesis 1:3 — And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

The “word” that God speaks isn’t like the words that we speak. The word that God speaks goes out, as it were, from His mouth and actually *does* what He has spoken. “God *said*, ‘*Let there be light*,’ and *there was* light.” Once again, the point here isn’t just sound travelling on airwaves. What we have here in the “word” that God “speaks” at creation is the self-revelation of God. The creation itself isn’t the Word, but it has been brought into existence *by* that eternal Word of God. And so we go on to read in John’s gospel:

□ John 1:3 (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2) — All things were made through him [through the Word that was with God and that was God], and without him [without this eternal Word] was not any thing made that was made.

In so far as the creation has been brought into existence *by* that eternal *Word* of God, it is at all times revealing God; it is at all times *speaking* to us of the glory of God. The Psalmist writes:

□ Psalm 19:1–2 — The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.

The Apostle Paul explains:

□ Romans 1:20 — For [God’s] *invisible* attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.

In other words, we are literally surrounded by the reality that God is a speaking God – a God who is, by His very nature, self-revealing. It's true that no man has ever seen or can see God, but the *revelation* of His invisible attributes is all around us. We cannot escape God's self-revelation because we're "in" it. We cannot escape that *word* that He spoke "in the beginning" (cf. Heb. 1:3).

When God created man, He didn't say "let there be," but He did still speak.

- Genesis 1:26–27 — Then God *said*, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..." So God *created* man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

The Bible says it's through that eternal *Word* of God that even we ourselves exist as the image bearers of God (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6). Therefore, just to exist—just to be me—is to be confronted with God and to know something of the truth about Him. In the very act of giving us existence through His "*Word*" the invisible God was speaking, revealing Himself to us. "In the beginning was the **Word**, and the Word was **with God**, and the Word **was God**. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made."

VI. Sinful human beings seek to suppress and drown out God's self-revelation

If by simply living in this world as human beings we're confronted unceasingly with the self-revelation of God then how are we to explain the fact that there are so many practical atheists living with that unspoken motto, "Out of sight, out of mind"? How are we to explain the fact, on the other hand, that there are so many self-made religions or "spiritualities" where God is whatever "*I*" have imagined He should be? How is this possible? The Bible's answer is simple: Sin. After God had brought Adam and Eve into existence by His Word, He continued to reveal Himself to them with "words."

- Genesis 2:16–17 — The LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Do you see that whenever God speaks, it's always a gracious revelation of Himself? So when God spoke to Adam and Eve in the garden He was revealing His lavish goodness ("you may surely eat of every tree of the garden") and also His sovereign lordship ("but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat"). The invisible God, whom no man has ever seen or can see, was calling Adam and Eve into a relationship with Himself – a relationship that was to be built on His self-revelation through His spoken Word.

So when the tempter tempted Eve what did he do? He questioned the *word* that God had spoken. He sought to cast doubt on the truthfulness and the reliability of God's revelation of Himself.

- Genesis 3:1 — He said to the woman, "Did God actually *say*..."?"

- Deuteronomy 4:12–13 — Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone.

Always, it was God's *word* that was the sign and the token of His special, saving *presence*. Always God drew near to His people *by His word*. Therefore, for God's *word* to be absent was for *God Himself* to be absent.

- Amos 8:11–12 — “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD, “when I will send a famine on the land— not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it.”

For 400 years God was “silent.” The heavens continued to declare the glory of God, and the sky above continued proclaiming His handiwork. Day to day continued pouring out speech, and night to night continued revealing knowledge. But that special word by which God drew near to His people with His special saving presence was withdrawn. God was silent. Can you feel the hopelessness of those words?

But there were still some who held on to the words that God had spoken in the past – who knew that God never lies and that His Word never fails. There were still some who knew God's presence with them *by faith* in this word that He had spoken:

- Isaiah 55:10–11 — For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

And so the faithful waited for the day when God's word would come to them again – when through His word God would draw near to them again with His promised saving presence. For 400 years the invisible God—the God whom no man has ever seen or can see—was silent. And then, in the fullness of time, the God who is by His very nature self-revealing spoke. How did He speak? How did His Word come to us? We read again in John's gospel:

- John 1:1–5, 14, 18 — In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it... And the Word[—this eternal Word—]**became flesh** and dwelt among us, and we have **seen** his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... No one has ever seen God; the only God, [that eternal Word] who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Conclusion

Will you cover your ears and drown out the Word that God has spoken and perish? Or will you come to God *through* the Word that He has spoken—through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh—and find everlasting *life* and *light* and *joy*? “In him was life,” John says, “and the life was the light of men.” And then John continues:

- John 1:9–13 — The true light, which gives light to everyone, *was coming into the world*. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Have you believed in His name? Have you believed in the eternal Word *made flesh* who suffered and died in the place of sinners like us so that we might be washed and forgiven and have eternal life as God’s own dear children? “No one has ever seen God; the only God, [that eternal Word] who is at the Father’s side, ***he has made him known.***”

- Matthew 1:18–25 — Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

I want to close with these words from the book of Hebrews:

- Hebrews 1:1–3 — Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Let us rejoice to bow before Him this Christmas season—and *always*.