

SESSION 4

FEAR NOT!

▶ ***The Point***

We don't need to fear evil forces when we're in Christ.

▶ ***The Passage***

1 John 4:1-6

▶ ***The Bible Meets Life***

She missed over 10,000 sunsets. For nearly 30 years, Marjorie Goff never left her apartment. She suffered from severe agoraphobia, an anxiety disorder in which a person fears open spaces and crowds. Driven by fear, Marjorie created a self-imposed prison out of her apartment. Only after a caring friend patiently coaxed her into therapy did Marjorie experience the beauty of the outdoors again.³

Marjorie found freedom and healing when she accepted the truth. She stopped believing the lie about herself or her circumstances. She acted on the truth and stepped outside.

We all know what it is to fear. And when we consider the evil in the world, we can truly feel afraid. Satan and the spiritual forces of darkness are real. They seek to do us harm. That's scary. Fortunately, as we'll see in 1 John 4:1-6, Christians need not fear the work of Satan or demons, because the One in us is greater than the one in the world.

▶ ***The Setting***

The apostle John wrote the Book of 1 John to a church in which false teachers were advocating a view of Christianity different from that of the apostles. These false teachers eventually left the church, but lingering doubts remained among members of the early church as to the nature of true Christian beliefs and practices. John wrote his letter in order to deal with these false teachers and to replace their heretical teachings with truth.

What does the Bible say?

Antichrist (v. 3)—This term refers either to a person who rejects biblical teaching about Jesus and attempts to mislead believers or to the end-times opponent of Jesus and His church.

1 John 4:1-6

¹ **Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.**

² **By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,**

³ **and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.**

⁴ **Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.**

⁵ **They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them.**

⁶ **We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.**

1 John 4:1-3 Commentary

Test the spirits and believe only those that hold to the truth of Jesus Christ.

[Verse 1] One of John's major goals in his letter was to refute the heresies of the false prophets and teachers who were trying to deceive the church. (See 2:26.) His readers were wrestling with the teachings of individuals who claimed their messages were based upon revelation from God. However, John warned his readers to **not believe every spirit**. Instead, he instructed them to **test the spirits**.

To test the spirits means to examine the messages of those claiming to be prophets and teachers **to see whether they are from God**. The Greek term for "spirits" is used of the Holy Spirit (see Matt. 1:18,20) and angels (see Heb. 1:14); however, it's also used for what Scripture identifies as evil and unclean spirits (see Luke 11:24,26) and demons (see Rev. 16:13-14).

John's readers were dealing with **false prophets** who had **gone out into the world**. These false teachers had been active in the church but eventually identified with "the world" rather than God's truth by leaving the church. (See 2:19.)

In other words, their true identity was now clear.

[Verse 2] John gave a clear example of how to **know the Spirit of God**. The false prophets who were troubling John's readers had a defective view of Jesus. Their heresy involved what today we call the doctrine of Christ, or Christology. Earlier, John had written that the false teachers denied that Jesus was the Christ, or the Messiah. (See 1 John 2:22.) John declared that a truthful spirit **confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh**.

In this context, when a person confesses something, he or she expresses in words what he or she believes in the heart. John was writing that if someone acknowledges that Jesus Christ was truly human, that person has an orthodox Christology. That Jesus was fully human and lived a sinless life allowed Him to be the perfect representative of humanity and an acceptable sacrifice to atone for our sins.

Christian tradition and many Bible students agree that the apostle John wrote the Gospel of John as well as 1, 2, and 3 John. In the beginning of the Gospel, John stressed both the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus. The basis for the doctrine traditionally called the "incarnation" of Jesus is seen especially in John 1:14. John used the key term "Word" to refer to the second Person of the Trinity: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

The Word, the eternal Son of God, took human form and lived among us. This powerful theological truth is crucial to John's discussion of false teaching in 1 John. John's audience could recognize those prophets and teachers who were **from God** by testing to see whether they acknowledged Jesus as coming "in the flesh."



STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

1 John 4:1-3 (continued)

³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

GUIDE: Use the second and third paragraphs in the Commentary section to help group members understand John’s use of the word “antichrist.”

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 40 of the PSG: **“What are some distortions of the nature of Jesus we still hear today?”**

Note: Consider encouraging group members to skim through the bullet list at the bottom of page 40 in the PSG to jump-start their thinking on how other religious systems view Jesus. However, be sure to mention that distortions about Jesus also come from sources outside of other religions.

RECAP: Read aloud the final two paragraphs on page 40 of the PSG:

The Scriptures are clear: *Jesus is both fully human and fully God.* Any religion, philosophy, or individual that rejects that foundational truth did not originate with God.

Satan is a master at corrupting the truth. But when we remain discerning and keep our eyes open by continually testing what we see and hear against God’s Word, we will not be caught in error.

DO: Provide a transition to 1 John 4:4-6 by instructing group members to complete the activity “Always” on page 41 of the PSG.



Listen to the song “Always” by Kristian Stanfill. As you listen, record your thoughts on the following questions:

- What comes to mind when the song references “foes,” “storms,” and “war”?
- What comes to mind when the song references help coming from the Lord?
- What emotions do you experience when you hear this song?

1 John 4:1-3 Commentary (continued)

[Verse 3] This test of Jesus' full humanity was helpful in identifying those who were false teachers. Anyone who could **not confess Jesus is not from God**. In light of John's argument in verse 2, the implication is that some people could not (or would not) affirm Jesus' incarnation. The **spirit** that denied Jesus' full humanity was in fact **the spirit of the antichrist**.

The term "antichrist" has at least two possible meanings. First, the preposition *anti* in Greek can have the meaning "against." Therefore, an antichrist might refer to someone who opposes (stands against) Christ and His work. Second, the preposition in Greek can also have the meaning of "in place of." Therefore, reference to an antichrist might mean someone who tries to replace Jesus. The traditional view of the end-times antichrist is closer to the first definition.

Only John used this exact term in the New Testament. (See 1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 7.) Earlier in the letter, John used it in both the singular and the plural (see 1 John 2:18), where John apparently was referencing both the end-times individual identified as the antichrist and many others who have the same spirit of antichrist. John stressed that these "antichrists" were already present, attempting to lure believers in Christ away from the truth. John reaffirmed this in verse 3, noting the spirit of the antichrist is **in the world already**.

Bible scholars are uncertain as to exactly why the denial of Jesus' humanity was an issue in the church of John's day. One popular view is that a religious belief system traditionally called "gnosticism" might have been behind the problem.

Scholars disagree on some details, but they note the gnostics claimed to possess a special knowledge about spiritual issues. *Gnosis* is a Greek word for "knowledge." In addition, the gnostics usually embraced a kind of dualism, meaning that the spiritual and material worlds were viewed as totally separate. In this system of thought, the spiritual world was seen as good and the material world was viewed as evil.

One consequence of this dualism was a form of gnosticism that held to a docetic view of Christ. The term "docetism" comes from a Greek word that means "to seem" or "to appear." Basically, this branch of gnosticism claimed Jesus only appeared to be human; He was not truly human. While gnosticism as a fully developed movement is generally viewed to have emerged in the second century A.D., the basic beliefs of gnostic docetism seems to match the "spirit of the antichrist" John took pains to denounce.

1 John 4:4-6 Commentary

Christ in us is greater than and victorious over Satan.

[Verse 4] John drew a sharp contrast between two types of people. Those faithful to Christ and the true teachings about Him were **from God**. Those who rejected Jesus' incarnation and advocated heresy were "from the world" (v. 5). The *them* in **you have overcome them** likely refers to the false teachers under discussion. The basis for this victory was the fact that **he** in God's people is **greater than he who is in the world**. This is the Holy Spirit. Before His crucifixion, Jesus promised His followers that the Holy Spirit would be with them in the days ahead. The role of the Holy Spirit as Helper is especially highlighted in John's account of the conversation in the Upper Room. (See John 14:16-18.)

In that same setting, Jesus noted His victory as the basis for His followers' confidence. Although Jesus would shortly face His own crucifixion, He said, "I have overcome the world" (16:33). John's letter builds on the victory claimed by Jesus. The tense of the Greek verb translated **have overcome** in 1 John 4:4 indicates a victory in the past that continues into the present. John said those born of God have overcome the world. "This is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4). John did not mean a generic faith or belief; he meant faith in Jesus as the Son of God (v. 5).

He who is in the world is most likely the devil. (See 3:10-14.) The devil suffered his decisive defeat through Jesus' death and resurrection, but he is still resisting God—in this instance through the antichrists, who were false teachers and false prophets troubling this church. The Greek word rendered **world** refers to a value system or worldview opposed to God, over which the devil rules. Earlier in his letter, John warned believers not to love the world or the things associated with the world (see 2:15), but he quickly identified the characteristics of the world as specific sinful attitudes. John was not saying that the material, natural world is evil; that view would be closer to gnostic dualism than Christianity. Indeed, Jesus told Nicodemus that God loved the world. (See John 3:16.)

[Verses 5-6] The opponents of John's original readers and those who oppose us today are from the world, having committed themselves to this value system which is in opposition to God and His will. Those who heed the messages of false prophets and false teachers are part of this same world system. Those from the world only listen to those who speak the messages of the world. John and his readers were **from God**. Anyone on God's side, who **knows God**, will listen to John's message, since he presented the truth about God. Anyone who is **not from God does not listen** to truth about God. John echoed the teaching of Jesus, who said His followers would know the truth and obey His teachings. (See John 8:31-32.)

Another clear contrast is the crucial difference between **truth** and **error**. Because the followers of Jesus know the truth, they can detect the **spirit of error**. One of the major works of the devil is deceiving the world. (See Rev. 12:9.) In fact, Jesus described the devil as "the father of lies" (John 8:44). The **Spirit of truth** is the Holy Spirit. *Truth* in this context involves a vital relationship with God through Jesus, acknowledging Him as Lord and Savior and living a life of faithful obedience to Him.



5 minutes

LIVE IT OUT

GUIDE: Direct group members to page 44 of the PSG. Encourage them to consider these options for living based on the truth that we have nothing to fear when we're connected to Christ.



Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

- ▶ **Memorize.** If you're prone to fear, memorize 1 John 4:4. Place cards with this verse in various places where you will see them throughout the day. Recite it whenever you feel afraid.
- ▶ **Be filled.** God has placed His Holy Spirit in your life. Stay focused in prayer so that you can continually rely on that Spirit to fill you, lead you, and give you discernment.
- ▶ **Be discerning.** Regularly evaluate the different "voices" you encounter in books, sermons, studies, online devotions, and articles. Determine what they believe about Christ and to what degree they lift up and honor the name of Christ.

Wrap It Up

TRANSITION: Read or restate the Conclusion from page 44 of the PSG:

Severe phobias aren't the only factor that keeps us from experiencing the life we were meant to live. Yes, evil is real. But so is God—and He is far superior to any force or opposition that might move against us. So don't be afraid!

PRAY: Conclude by echoing the truth from Scripture that God's Spirit is greater than any other force present in creation. Pray that you and your group members would rely on God's Spirit as you seek to serve Him each day.



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