

Fake News

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Each of us can remember a time when we received some kind of false report or, what we often call nowadays, fake news. And, when we first hear these reports, we can be unsettled by them; we can take unnecessary steps and worry about things for no reason. Just think about all the fake news which has been mindlessly reported and perpetuated on social media concerning Covid-19. Fake news can be dangerous when it leads us astray.

Well, we're going to see this morning that such false reports are nothing new. In today's text, Paul is forced to deal with some bad, fake news concerning the return of Jesus. Some people were spreading the rumor that Christ had already come back—that he'd already returned. And, believers were understandably upset by this.

Let's see how Paul counsels and encourages them in the midst of these lies.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

2 Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, ² not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us—whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter—asserting that the day of the Lord has already come. ³ Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. ⁴ He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

⁵ Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? ⁶ And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. ⁷ For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. ⁸ And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. ⁹ The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with how Satan works. He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, ¹⁰ and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. ¹¹ For this reason God sends them a powerful

delusion so that they will believe the lie ¹² and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

In order to calm the Thessalonians' fears, Paul tells them to do three things— Paul tells them to (1st) remember the order of things; (2nd) know and despise the man of chaos; and (3rd) know and love the man of order. This morning, rather than wade into all the speculative debates argued over these twelve verses, we're going to stick with these foundational lessons in it—lessons which bring hope and encouragement to believers who face uncertain times.

1. Remember the order of things.

I see this first lesson, from the apostle Paul, in verse three of today's passage. Listen to what he says there once again.

Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction (v. 3).

There are two things that must happen before Christ's return, Paul assures us. There will be a great rebellion and the rise of a leader who is characterized as lawless and self-exalting and, ultimately, doomed to destruction. Until these things happen, the Lord Jesus will not come.

The word "rebellion" here is the Greek word ἀποστασία. A literal translation of it would be "to move away from a stand" and it's where we get the word apostasy in English from. In our day, it's almost always connected to a person's abandonment of his or her religious beliefs. And, Paul definitely had something like that in mind as he wrote about this great, future rebellion.

Just consider how various Bible translations describe this revolt.

- The New Living Translation calls it—"a great rebellion against God"
- The New King James Version describes it as—"the falling away"
- The Contemporary English Version says—"people will rebel against God"

Friends, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul looks to the future and tells us that until there's a massive rebellion against the Lord and his gospel, Jesus won't return.

Until an unparalleled figure—*who himself claims to be divine or claims to be God!*—leads a vast campaign against the faithful, Jesus won't return. The apostle Paul says: *Don't be fooled. Remember the order of things.*

So while many throughout history (as well as many in our own day) use events like this one to proclaim the end of things—to say that Jesus' return is *near* or *here* or *past*—Paul encourages us to stay calm and to not jump too quickly to conclusions. Don't go in for fake news, he says. Rather, know the order of things.

You know, it strikes me that if we simply use our time to diligently serve God, things will work themselves out. If we simply invest our energy and desire and love in the things that please Jesus, we won't have to worry whether Jesus is coming now or ten thousand years from now. We won't have to fear because when Jesus comes we'll get his commendation. He'll be proud of us for doing our job (Matthew 24:46), because that's what he's commanded us to do ...our job.

Not to figure out or worry about the exact timing of his second coming!

2. Know and despise the man of chaos.

As we dig in here, I want to make sure you're clear on what I mean by know because there's been much confusion over this throughout the history of the church. What do I mean by know the man of lawlessness?

Well, let me begin with what I don't mean by knowing him. I'm not talking about discovering an individual. I'm not talking about pinpointing the precise person who is lawless and self-exalting and, ultimately, doomed to destruction. In the past, many confident people have declared, with absolute certainty, to know who he was yet were proven wrong and foolish in the end.¹

- Various Roman emperors, during the early church period, were identified as the man of lawlessness or the antichrist.
- Once the Roman empire became Christianized, the kings and the warlords of the people groups who attacked the empire were suddenly in vogue.
- As Islam grew in prominence, Muhammad became an easy target.

¹ What follows is a summary from James H. Grant Jr., *1 & 2 Thessalonians: The Hope of Salvation*, 182-183.

- During the Reformation, many Protestants readily identified various popes or the papacy in general as the man of lawlessness. In response, Catholics offered-up Martin Luther.

Friends, the guesses just keep on coming—Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Obama, and Trump have all made the lists. And, what are the benefits to such speculation? What good has it done? None whatsoever! It has merely distracted many believers from serving Jesus in the here and now of their lives.

It's for this reason that, rather than know a specific name or a precise identity, I want us to know and despise what will characterize this figure. That's profitable. That's worth our time and effort. Knowing what will typify the man of lawlessness will help us see—in the world and also in ourselves—the types of evil characteristics which are foundationally against the kingdom of God. To know and to despise these is of great benefit to us.

So what do we know about this figure's character?

a. We're told he will oppose God and, instead, exalt himself (v. 4).

You know, whenever we see self-exaltation, we are seeing something ugly—something that is in opposition to God. Christians should be a people characterized by humility. We should likewise admire this quality and affirm it in our leadership. Friends, pray for it in yourself and in others; cultivate it in yourself and encourage it in others. When you do so, you will find yourself less and less in opposition to God and, thus, less and less likely to be influenced by those who self-exalt.

b. We're also told he will align himself with Satan's work (vv. 9-10).

What is Satan's work? In a nutshell, it is to steal God's glory. Satan has been, from the beginning, a glory thief. And, he does this by trying to undermine the laws and the order of God. Just think about the fall of humanity (Genesis 3): *Eat the fruit. Break the law.* And, chaos (in the form of sin) disrupts God's "good" creative order. So it is with the man of lawlessness! Christians, consequently, are called to be those who worship and serve God by valuing and obeying his law. We should see the law as a good gift from God—a light which "is a lamp for [our] feet" (Psalm 119:105), a light which guides us through this dark, sinful world.

It's fascinating, to me, that the people this lawless man leads astray are those who have "refused to love the truth" (v. 10). Notice the apostle doesn't say that these are people who are ignorant of the truth or who don't know the truth. That's not it. These are people who don't love it. Who are ashamed of it! Who will quickly dismiss what's true when given the opportunity.

Friends, do you love the truth? Do you love the laws of the Lord? If you do, you'll come to despise the very character of what the man of lawlessness represents and does. And, you won't easily be led astray. You won't be someone who follows after "the secret power of lawlessness...already at work" in this world (v. 7). Rather, you'll be those people who are "not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

Brothers and sisters, rather than being a people who are constantly speculating about the identity of the antichrist, be a people who cultivate a Christlike character. Be a people who are humble and who love the law of the Lord. When you do this, you'll not be deceived by false saviors.

3. Know and love the man of order.

If the man of chaos is the image of Satan, then the man of order is the image of our God in this world. Rather than being the one who opposes God, he's the one who serves God in perfect unity. So, Jesus explains about himself:

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work (John 14:9-10).

Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15) and perfectly united to his heavenly Father; he is the suffering Servant (Isaiah 53)—the Son who's always about the will of his Father (Luke 2:49), even to the point of death.

If the man of chaos is self-exalting, then the man of order is full of humility for the glory of God. He is willing to sacrifice and suffer and even die for the Lord. So, Paul can record these poetic lines about him:

[Jesus] made himself nothing / by taking the very nature of a servant, / being made in human likeness. / And being found in appearance as a man, / he humbled himself / by becoming obedient to death (Philippians 2:7-8).

The Son of God didn't greedily grasp his rights as God or use them to exalt himself. He humbly put those rights aside to serve God's redemptive plan. Jesus became poor so that we might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). The one who deserved exaltation, in every way, set it aside for the glory of God and for our salvation.

If the design of the man of chaos is to lead people away from God, the design of the man of order is to lead them back to him. He came to call sinners like us back into right relationship with our Creator. Therefore, after being criticized for eating and drinking with sinners, Jesus summarizes his mission in this way:

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:31-32).

There is a cliché in sports which states—*The best defense is a good offense.* Let me encourage you to meditate upon that as we close. If you would like protection from Satan's schemes, if you want shelter from the doubts and deceptions he sows, then cultivate a love for Jesus. Spend some time meditating upon his beautiful life and character. Consider his compassion for those who are marginalized and broken. Dwell upon his profound humility. And, ponder his worshipful obedience.

When I see his character, I long for it in me. And, I'm attracted to those people who display something of it. Those are the people I want to be like. People who look like Jesus. People who reflect Christ's attributes. The people who have fallen in love with their Savior. Amen.