

“Don’t Be Shaken”
2Thessalonians 2:1-5
February 13, 2022

Welcome back to our series *Living According to Hope* in the book of 2Thessalonians. This young church exemplifies that *if our confidence in the truth falters, our hope will be shaken*. But Paul is going to remind us that *living according to hope means living according to the truth*.

[Prayer]

It seems that half the telephone calls I receive these days are some kind of phone scam. For the most part, these scammers are not very good at what they do. Within a few seconds I am on to them and off the phone. Yet not all criminals are dumb. In fact, this week I actually got a scam call that managed to ghost themselves under Mayo Clinic’s caller I.D. I quickly detected it was a spam call, but occasionally you may come across a person who is so skilled at his deceptive strategy that even the most skeptical of us can be taken into a web of deceit. For example, we hired a wedding videographer with great reviews only to discover that the business that took our down payment didn’t actually exist (he was actually stealing credibility from real people). Fortunately, we were able to get our money back but not all scams will result in the mere loss of money.

Today’s passage is one of at least 10 NT warnings to vigilantly guard ourselves from being deceived.¹ Spiritual deception can devastate the quality of our lives and in some cases even result in eternal consequences.

To deceive is “to mislead the mind” into error. To deceive is to ensnare someone by causing them to believe what is false or to disbelieve what is true.²

Before we jump into the details of 2Thess, it may be helpful for us to grasp the weightiness of Paul’s exhortation in vs. 3 where he says, “Let no one in any way deceive you.” Let’s take a moment to look at the warning against

deception from the wider lens of the NT and then zoom in to the particular concern of 2Thess 2.

Let me draw your attention to 6 *general reasons why the NT warning against deception is so critical for us to heed*:

1. **Our hearts are already deceived in our fallen nature, making us susceptible to further self-deception** (Jer 17:9).
 - Jer 17:9 – “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?”
 - In Mark 7:22 Jesus taught us that from within the heart flow evil thoughts including *deceit*. That’s what comes out of us because it’s in us.
 - According to 1Jn 1:18, “if we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves.”
2. **Sin itself is deceiving** (Heb 3:13).
 - Heb 3:13 instructs us to encourage one another daily lest we be “hardened by *the deceitfulness of sin*.”
 - Paul testified in Rom 7:11, “sin...deceived me.”
 - James 1:26 – “If anyone thinks himself to be religious, yet does not bridle his tongue, but *deceives his own heart*, this man’s religion is worthless.” *Hypocrisy is self-deceptive!*
 - Gal 6:3 – “If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” *Pride is self-deceptive!*
 - This is why Eph 4:22 calls us to “lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit.”

What we need to see here is that when we sin out of deceived hearts, the very sin we commit leads to further deception!
3. **The influence of the world is characterized by deception** (Col 2:8).
 - Col 2:8 – “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and *empty deception*, according to the tradition of men, *according to the elementary principles of the world*, rather than according to Christ.”

¹ 1Cor 3:18; 6:9; 15:33; Col 2:8; 2Thess 2:3; 1Jn 3:7; James 1:16; Eph 5:6; Gal 6:7; Mt 24:4

² Noah Webster. The 1828 *American Dictionary of the English language*.

Today we see things going on in our world and culture that seem absolutely absurd—they don't make sense. It seems as though people are intent on doing evil and destroying good. Why? Why do people seem to have evil agendas? Pr 12:20 says, "Deceit is in the heart of those who do evil." They are deceived even as they deceive others. Eph 2:2 explains that they are being led by the prince of the power of the air (Satan) with a spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Hence, Paul later said in Eph 5:6, "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the **sons of disobedience**. Therefore, do not be partakers with them."

4. **Satan is a deceiver—and he has his scope on you!** (2Cor 11:3)

- In John 8:44, Jesus said of the devil, "there is no truth in him...he is a liar and the father of lies."
- Rev 12:9 says, "Satan deceives the whole world"
- This is why Paul wrote in 2Cor 11:3, "I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity *of devotion* to Christ."

5. **Days of great deception are coming which will plunge many into apostacy** (2Thess 2:3).

- **1Tim 4:1** – "The Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron"
- 2 Tim 3:13 – Evil men and impostors will proceed *from* bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived."
- Mt 24:24 – "false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, **if possible, even the elect**."

So, guard against deception now so as not to be susceptible to even greater deception in the last days.

6. **God's judgment is both a means and the result of spiritual deception** (2Thess 2:11-12; Rom 1:28-29).

Here's what I am getting at. We are not only victims of our own deception as well as the deception of the world and the devil. We are also responsible for its progress in our lives by failing to steward and apply the truth God has provided to expose sin's deceitfulness.

Beware, God not only judges the sin of deception, but also gives people over to the full impact of their fallen, sinful deception as a means of judgment.

- As we will see in 2Thess 2:11-12 next week, "*God will send a deluding influence [on those who do not love the truth] so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.*" This is a judicial deception or a judicial hardening. Those who reject truth, will be given over to deceit as a form of judgment. God will harden their hearts as means of judgment—inevitable, irrevocable judgment! This is consistent with what God did in Romans 1...
- Romans 1:28-29 – "And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; *they are* gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them."

So when Paul says, "Let no one in any way deceive you," he's saying it to us as those who are susceptible to deception and must contend with the influence of their own flesh, the devil, and the world. We are surrounded by a deception that will only get worse! And they must guard against it because deception is liable to God's judgment.

The deception that Paul is warning against in 2 Thess 2 has come in the form of false teaching within the church. It appears as though some had been spreading the rumor that the return of Christ had already taken place and that somehow the Thessalonians has missed out. So Paul writes in **[vs. 1-2]**.

Apparently, this rumor or false teaching was forged as though coming from Paul, and the result is that the Thessalonian's faith had been shaken. When Paul urges them to not lose their composure, he uses the word *nous* or mind. Literally, don't lose your mind! Don't stop thinking what is true!

Remember that deception is always aimed at the mind, and what we think is critical to what we believe. Attacking the mind is a strategic way to attack one's faith. This is why it's so important for you to be mindful what your thought processes so that your faith will not be shaken, because when *our confidence in the truth falters, our hope will be shaken.*

There is a life principle here for us. ***If your confidence is in anything other than God's truth, either your hope will be shaken, or you will live under the trance of deception.*** It's interesting to note that in the Greek version of OT, the same word for *shaken* is used in Psalm 16:7-8 where David declares, "*I will bless the LORD who has counseled me; Indeed, my mind instructs me in the night. I have set the LORD continually before me; Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.*" Paul used his mind to instruct himself with the counsel of the Lord so that he would not be shaken by his circumstances.

And we must do the same! As we look around us today, we can easily be shaken and disturbed by what is happening politically and socially in our culture. And while there is a sense in which we should be disturbed by seeing evil called good and good called evil, and while we should do everything we can to promote righteousness in our fallen world, we must not be overcome by fear. God still reigns and He will bring about His final purposes in this world, even through its delusion.

So, on the one hand, we ought to do everything we can as citizens to promote good and denounce evil in our world. Yet on the other hand, we must not allow political activism (which has its proper place) to usurp our primary mission as Christians to take the gospel to our neighborhoods and the nations. What's happening in our world is a big deal and it requires us to be discerning, yet it is secondary to God's sovereign purposes and our call to stay focused on the mission of the gospel in these tumultuous times. So my encouragement to you is to *find your stability in God*, rather than giving in to fear over the instability of the world—and this all the more as we move further into the latter days.

Paul's response to the false teaching that had disturbed the Thessalonians was to reiterate what he had already taught them (5). In vs. 3 he reminds them that before Christ returns, a two-fold event must take place. This 2-fold event is the apostacy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness. I refer to them as a single two-fold event because they are not only linked

together with a single definite article in Greek, but also because Daniel 11 seems to portray them as happening together. But for our purposes this morning, let's look at them individually to get a sense of what each of them means.

1. **The apostacy will precede the return of Christ** (2Thess 2:3).

The term *apostacy* means "rebellion." It refers to a time when a great multitude of Christians will forsake their former allegiance to Christ and fall away from the faith.

Jesus describes a future time of great deception and apostacy in Mt 24:

"See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many. And you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs. Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name. And at that time many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come.

Jesus then goes on in Mt 24 to speak of the abomination of desolation and the great tribulation. This will be a time of severe delusion, intimidation, and supernatural evil, intended to "mislead, if possible, even the elect" (Mt 24:24).

In 1Tim 4:1-2 Paul describes what we can expect as we draw closer to the great apostacy:

"But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron..."

Paul continues to alert us to this growing reality in 2Tim 3:

“But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God...Evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2Tim 3:1-4, 13).

Beloved, we must guard against deception today so as not to be susceptible to even greater deception in the coming days. And should we see the day of great apostacy, hold on to your faith and hope knowing that the return of Christ is at hand!

2. **The man of lawlessness will precede the return of Christ** (2Thess 2:3).

Who is the man of lawlessness? He is most famously known as the Antichrist.³ But here in 2Thess 2:3 Paul refers to Him as the man of lawlessness and the son of destruction, “who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called God or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, display himself as being God.”

Man of lawlessness means that the Antichrist will see himself as above all law (including God’s law) and therefore he will be lawless—unrestrained. He will be the personification of sin, evil, and all that is opposed to Christ.

The apostle calls him the *son of destruction*, not merely because of the destruction he will bring about, but primarily because he is doomed for destruction. As we will see next week in vs. 8, “then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breadth of his mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of his coming.”

The man of lawlessness will be more than a political figure who rises to worldwide power. He will also “exalt himself above every so-called god or object of worship” (4). That is, he will demand religious devotion as well as political loyalty. He will demand to be the central world figure in every respect. He will have no human accountability and his influence will be

powered by Satan himself. According to Daniel 11:36, this “king will do as he pleases, and he will exalt and magnify himself above every god, and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods; and he will prosper until the indignation is finished, for that which is decreed will be done.”

According to vs. 4, he will even “take his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.” There is a considerable amount of debate over what Paul means by “the temple of God.” Will there be a future physical temple in Jerusalem? Or is it possible that Paul is referring to the church? “The same phrase, *God’s temple*, is found nine other times in the New Testament...and it almost always refers either to Christ or the church.”⁴ Furthermore, [Daniel 11:32-33] foresees the antichrist attacking the covenant community with smooth words of deception as well as persecution toward those who remain faithful to God.

Whatever Paul means by “the temple of God,” it’s desecration by the Antichrist was referred to by Jesus as the abomination of desolation (Mt 24:15; cf. Dan 11:31), and it will likely be unmistakable to believers when they see it.

Paul’s encouragement to the Thessalonians is that they have not missed the return of Christ, and believers will know His return is at hand when they see the great apostacy and the man of lawlessness revealed. The church will endure great suffering as we await that day, yet *we can live according to hope* knowing that God will not abandon His people.

So how do we live according to hope? ***We live according to hope by living according to the truth.*** The purpose of this passage is not for us to speculate about particular details of the end times. Paul’s purpose is pastoral: “let no one in any way deceive you” (3).

Church, there is only one way to guard yourself against deception. You will detect deceit and you will resist intimidation when you ***love the truth.*** Vs. 10 proceeds to clarify that those who perish in deception do so because “they *refused to love the truth* so as to be saved.” Step one is knowing the truth. Make it your life mission to know the Bible. Yet knowledge alone will not give you the strength to stand under severe testing. The truth must own the affections of your heart. When you love God and all that He says is true,

³ 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 1:7

⁴ G.K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians* (IVPNTC), pg. 207-208.

you will lay down your life to honor that truth, because truth is not a mere principle, but the divine person of Jesus Christ, our Savior and our life!

This message is not for future reference. It's for today. Vs. 7 alerts us to the fact that the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. 1Jn 4:3 says, "the spirit of antichrist...is in the world already." ***As we anticipate the return of Christ and the events of the last days, we must stand firm in our love of the truth so as not to be deceived.*** If your faith is not grounded in the truth, you will not stand. But those who persevere because they love the truth, will be saved.

So let me urge you to respond in two practical ways:

1. Give yourself to the Bible while praying, "*Lord, help me see the truthfulness of Your truth and to love what I see! Give me a heart that loves Your truth.*"
2. Dads and moms, your primary responsibility as parents is to do whatever you can to help your children get grounded in the truth so that they will be able to stand in days of greater deception and persecution. If they do not love the truth, they will not stand. But those who love the truth out of a wholehearted love for Christ will stand in the face of deception and death—and they will reign with Christ!