

How To Not Be Afraid Of The Future

This morning I am going to continue in a series I started a few weeks ago about the End Times and what the Bible teaches regarding the future. Now, I have said this several times already, but I want to repeat why I am doing this series. I believe that in America today, people have lost sight of the future. Many, many people, including many people in the church and in the Christian community live so entirely in the present that they have lost their hope. As you read the Bible, you find that what is coming in the future is presented to Christians as a counter-balancing hope to a Christian's present difficult circumstance. In other words, the way that the Bible teaches people to deal with the present and with trial and present difficulties and present hassles is to be able to look ahead and see something brighter and better that is going to happen.

So, I have been talking about the issue of *Recovering Our Christian Hope*. We have been going through some of the Bible teachings about the end time—the last days before Jesus returns. Today, I am going to talk about a subject that is intriguing to most people. Something that many of you probably have had at least a passing interest in finding out about—and that is the whole subject of the anti-Christ. Even if you are totally unfamiliar with the Bible, you probably have heard that the Bible teaches that a person is going to appear on the scene who will be the embodiment of opposition to Jesus and opposition to Christians called the anti-Christ. This person will persecute Christians; will oppose God; will draw a mass of followers after him in a worldwide governmental and religious coalition. There is going to be a great powerful combination of both the government power and religious power employed together in the service of this person named anti-Christ.

Several weeks ago I told you what my view of what the very last days were going to be like. I said that I believe that there isn't going to be two comings of Jesus—a secret coming and a glorious coming. I didn't see two comings of Christ taught in the scriptures. I see one glorious manifestation, one glorious coming of Jesus back for the church and that Christians are going to have to go through some very difficult times—sometimes labeled the "great tribulation" before they are rescued by their Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me state the issue very clearly that I want to deal with today. We are going to be looking at anti-Christ out of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. We are going to be looking at 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2. We are going to be seeing his opposition to God and his deceptiveness and the counterfeit miracles; his hatred of Christians; physical persecution against many Christians and false doctrine; all of that. In light of the coming rise of anti-Christ and in light of the great tribulation that will be visited upon the church, how can we look forward to the future and not be afraid?

This is a question that really has to be answered whether we are living in the last days and are going to be faced with anti-Christ or not. In light of some of the signs that you are seeing in this country right now. We will talk about some of them today, but some of the indicators that things are looking down—you know, the taxes are surely going to go up in one form or another; the crime rate appears to be on a unbroken line upward; the health care system is surely going to be revised and if you are associated with the health professions, that might be creating some anxiety as you are wondering what the government is going to come up with next; the educational system seems like it is going south. In light of a recent survey that was taken by the New York Times which indicated that only 13% of Americans believed this country is headed in the right direction—only 13%. If you are among the 87% that thinks that things are not going in the right direction and the indicators are looking down, how can you look toward the future and not be afraid?

Certainly, it isn't just on the global issues, but also on a more personal level. Perhaps, as you see marriages that are breaking up all around you, you may wonder about the stability of your own marriage. How do I know that my husband will be faithful? There is some core fear that you have on a personal level. Surely some trial may come my way. Maybe not on the level of anti-Christ, but it will be a financial trial, or perhaps you are afraid at a core level about a possible sickness that might afflict one of your children. Your spouse might get sick or die. You might never be married. You might lose your job.

I want to address our fears of the future as we look at perhaps the most frightening thing to face us as Christians and to face the church—that is the rise of anti-Christ. I have called today's talk, very simply, *How To Not Be Afraid Of The Future*. Let's pray.

I want to read from 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2. Paul begins in 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, "Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy or report or letter supposed to have come from us saying that the day of the Lord has already come." He announces the theme of the chapter and what the problem is going to be. That is people will become easily unsettled or alarmed as they are told about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The word for coming here is the Greek word *parousia*. It was used back then for the arrival of the emperor for a royal visit to the community; with all the pomp and circumstance surrounding the arrival of the emperor; with all the great men and women of the town going down to the local dock and greet the emperor and his entourage as he steps off the boat. Or as he came in with his entourage by way of royal chariot. It was a glorious event—the coming of the emperor. Paul uses that word that had a fixed meaning, a glorious manifestation, when he is speaking about the glorious coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Again, what I want you to understand about the coming of Jesus is that every time his second coming is mentioned in the Bible, it is always described by words implying glory and awesomeness; something that will be visible. There is no hint of a secret coming; a non-glorious coming, something less than the entire blessed hope.

So, he says as you look forward to this coming of our great emperor, Jesus, I don't want you to become unsettled or alarmed. Isn't that the tendency of people as they consider the end times and the coming of the anti-Christ and all that is going to occur with the coming of anti-Christ and then finally the return of the Lord? They become unsettled. Literally, it was used to describe boats without anchors. There is no mooring. There is no stability. And, the boat is just sort of bouncing around. Another picture would be of ground that is moving during an earthquake. You know, you watch a person who is trying to stand when all the plates are shifting around underneath their feet and it is very unstable and very unsure. There is a lack of balance.

The characteristic of many people as they pursue an interest in the last days is a lack of balance; a lack of mooring; a lack of stability; just shaken about. Paul says: I don't want that for you. I don't want you to be unsettled. Then he goes on and he says I don't want you to be alarmed. Easily unsettled or alarmed. That is the other tendency. People get very frightened. Not only do they lose their balance, but emotionally there is a lot of anxiety as folks look at the future.

I see that in America today. A tremendous amount of fear and anxiety regarding what is happening to this country. Indeed, if you read the fundraising appeals of most organizations, both on the right and on the left, they are filled with dire predictions regarding the future. And, all of those predictions regarding the future are designed to raise our anxiety. That if this group continues to get in power, they are going to tear down the military or they are going to ruin our schools, or they are going to ruin our legal institutions. They are dire predictions and this creates worry and fretting. So, you take your check book out dutifully and send a check off hoping that the person who is raising the funds will do something to deal with the future.

I particularly appreciate the fact that he says that this sense of alarm and unsettlement might come from a prophecy. "Do not become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy or report or letter supposedly coming from us." Now, that is the case regarding much of the current speculation about the future. It is reported to come from a prophecy and many prophetic types are going about saying that they have heard from the Lord. Or they have received special insight regarding the true meaning of a particular Bible text and then they are explaining this fantastic scenario. If you pick up a book on the end times in any Christian bookstore, you are going to see these incredibly elaborate schemes of specific dates and what is going to happen at certain periods of time in the great tribulation. There are charts and graphs and I mean the thing is more complex than the planning of the D-day invasion. It is just incredible. Have you ever noticed that when you try to go back and look up the verses, they never quite read in the same way that the charts and graphs claim they read. And you scratch your head and say: Well, gee, I don't see that, but, boy, this person is a Bible scholar. Don't you say that to yourself? Well, I really don't see where that particular invasion is going to happen, but I guess he is a Bible scholar, he must know or she must know the real meaning, the true meaning behind this. They seem to have so many verses, so I guess I ought to submit my intellect and my spirituality to this other authority. Paul says: I don't want you to do that. I don't

want you to get unbalanced and unsettled. I don't want you swept away by the latest prophetic rage that comes to you in a newsletter. Somebody, somewhere, saw something in the sky. Don't allow yourselves to be swept around like a ship without an anchor.

One of the things that the Thessalonians were being swept around with was the claim that the day of the Lord had already come. That Jesus had somehow secretly arrived and they weren't aware of it. They missed it somehow. You say: How could any group of people believe that? I mean, Rich, if it is going to be a glorious happening, something that can't be missed, a manifestation like the coming of the emperor to a city, a royal visit with the whole entourage of angels and you know, trumpet sounds, why would anybody think they missed it? Because we lose the grip on the scriptures. We begin to follow somebody who claims to have a private prophecy about what it is really going to be like—a fresh insight, a new revelation. Oh well, nobody would believe that kind of thing, would they?

There are millions of people who believe precisely that. They go around teaching that the day of the Lord has already come. They are called "Jehovah's Witnesses." Their founder, Charles Russell, taught that the day of the Lord was going to come in 1874. And when it didn't come, he extended the prediction as all of the prophets always do, he extended the prediction to 1914. And then his successor in 1914, when it didn't appear that the day of the Lord had come in any manifest way, said and taught his followers: That yes, the day of the Lord did come, but it came secretly. And on that day, Jesus exchanged his ordinary seat at the Father's right hand for the throne of his kingdom. So, we shouldn't expect a glorious coming of the Lord Jesus, Jehovah's Witnesses teach, because it has already come.

Paul says: I don't want you to be taken in by that kind of teaching of a secret coming that you wouldn't be aware of. Then, to make it plain, he says: For that day will not come unless two things take place. Verse 3: "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way for that day, the day of the Lord, will not come until the rebellion occurs [number one] and the man of lawlessness is revealed [number two]."

Now, I want to pause here and reflect for a moment—gather up our thoughts. Last week I said that there were certain signs that must occur before the Lord returns. It wasn't Rich's words about it, we looked at the Bible and we found in Mark, chapter 13, verse 10, that the gospel needed to be preached to all nations and then the end would come, but first, the message regarding Jesus Christ and his death for sin must be taken out and witnessed to every nation and every people group on earth before Christ will return.

We also saw that before Christ returns, the Jewish people as a nation, as a whole, must turn to Jesus because Jesus said on Palm Sunday: "You will not see me again, until you say: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." So, last week we studied two great things that must occur before the Lord returns. The gospel taken to all nations and the conversion of the Jewish people. This week we see another great sign. A rebellion and the rise of the man of

lawlessness, with Paul saying: "the day will not occur until the rebellion [happens] and the man of lawlessness is revealed."

Now, as we pause and reflect about the whole issue of signs of the end, we must see that the signs were given for a reason. See, there is a popular teaching that says that Jesus could come back at any second, *at any second*, in the next two seconds; in the next five seconds the Lord can return. Well, if the Lord can return in the next two seconds, or the next five seconds, then why did the Bible give us signs? What is the point of a sign, something that we should look at or consider, or view as some kind of precondition of the Lord's return, if those preconditions don't need to be met? If the Lord could come back at any moment, then why did God speak to us and tell us: No, the Lord will not return until these signs were fulfilled? See, it is not necessary for a Christian to believe that Jesus could come back at any second. The expectation of a Christian is not Christ may return in the next four seconds. The expectation of a Christian always needs to be that Christ could return very soon. And, these signs as laid out in the Bible could happen very rapidly. Certainly we see that as we look at world events that what appeared to be far off, requiring major changes, happened in a day, in a few days—the fall of communism. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the soviet empire happened very rapidly in just a very short time. We might be living at a period of time in which the signs of conversion of the Jewish people or the preaching of the gospel, or the revelation of anti-Christ could happen very quickly. But, they do need to happen before the Lord returns.

Now, we need to also understand that from a time-line perspective, the time on the clock for the Christian is always the last hour. In 1 John 2, John writes: "We know that this is the last hour." You say: Well, that was written over two thousand years ago, how could that be the last hour? Surely, John was wrong. He wasn't living in the last hour. We don't know how time works according to the Lord. The time on the clock is always 5 to 12. The minute hand could strike very quickly for the Christian. Let me explain what I mean. It is kind of like you had a ball and it rolled along the edge of a table, about one inch from the edge, and the table was very long. You would say: How close to the edge of the table is that ball? It is always one inch from the end and that ball could keep rolling for a thousand feet if the table is a thousand feet long, but it is always one inch from the edge and just a little bit of movement from the side would push the ball over the edge. That is the way it has been in history. History is always just an inch from the edge. Just an hour from the end. With any pressure coming from the Lord, history could end. It could go on for two thousand years, but it always near the edge.

If you picture a river running along the edge of a cliff, that river could run for miles and miles along the edge of the cliff, but suddenly it takes a break and goes tumbling over the cliff in a gigantic waterfall. That is the Christian picture of time. We are right on the edge of the end. A few signs occur, fulfillment of a few very last details of Bible prophecy and then the Lord is going to return.

So, in this passage Paul says that there are two signs—actually one great one, but we can break it up into two parts. He says in verse 3: "Don't let anyone deceive you in any way for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs

[number one] and the man of lawlessness is revealed [number two]." There must be a rebellion. The word is, literally, apostasy—a departure from the faith. What he is speaking about here, I believe, is what John talks about (and you can take a look at John, chapter 2) of people who go out from the church because they are not really a part of the church. They have only the name Christian on them, but they don't have the stuff of a Christian, the faith of a Christian. These people go out from the church and they deny the deity of Jesus Christ. They deny that in Christ, God came in the flesh. They deny the authority of the Bible, although they still title themselves with the title "Christian." At the end a great rebellion is going to occur—a great apostasy from the church.

You know, this business of rebellion against what the church has always taught—the historic Christian faith that has been handed down from our forefathers, from the time of the apostles, handed down to us and now that we are in the 90's this great revolt against that and an attempt to redefine and recreate Christianity according to what the current popular craze is. I don't think I ever saw it as clearly as I did some years ago before I began pastoring. Many of you know that I used to teach at Ohio State. I taught law there. I was asked to be on a steering committee to help Christians to reconcile their differences out of court. According to the Bible, Christians shouldn't sue one another in court. Christians ought to turn to other Christians to help resolve their disputes. That is in 1 Corinthians, chapter 6. Well, very often, there is no place for a Christian to turn to when they have a dispute against another Christian. There is no group of people set up to help them settle their disputes. So, some Christian lawyers and Christians judges got together and I was invited to help to create a Christian conciliation counsel here in Columbus to help Christians resolve their disputes out of court.

One of the committee members was John Cook who is a lawyer and a member of our congregation. He was asked to draw up for the committee a very simple statement of faith that we would all agree to as a basic statement of what it meant that it was Christian conciliation. So, John drew up a very simple five point statement of faith that we would all agree to as kind of the foundation of what a Christian would believe in order to serve on this conciliation service. And it was very general statements that any Roman Catholic or Episcopalian or Lutheran or Vineyard church member or Baptist, anybody, could generally agree to. We believe that God is a trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We believe in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. We believe that Christ died for our sins. We believe that he rose from the dead and we believe that Christ is coming again. No problem, right?

Well, on that committee was a seminary professor from a local seminary. And he looked at the statement of faith that was drafted by John and he literally picked it up and threw it across the table and said: "I don't believe any of this." I thought some of the committee members who were of a more fundamental stripe were going to have heart attacks. And then he went into his own explanation of what it meant to be a Christian and he decided that he was one of those people who believed that Christianity was a matter of self-definition. That whatever contents you wanted to fit into the word, Christian, you had a right to fit. And it

had nothing to do with what the church has historically taught or what the Bible teaches, it was up to the individual.

That is what Paul is referring to by "the great rebellion." That millions and millions and millions of church members will suddenly rise up and say: We can define for ourselves what Christianity is all about and as it says in the book of Judges: "everyone will do what they see fit in their own eyes." They will cast off the authority of the scripture and they will cast off the authority of the church historically—a great rebellion.

The second thing that is going to occur is the rise of a figure named anti-Christ. What will anti-Christ be like? Will he be a monster with fangs and blood dripping from his mouth? Someone who is a raving lunatic? A horrible looking, you know, figure out of Jurassic Park?

Well, the scripture gives us four descriptions of anti-Christ. In verses 3 and 4 he calls him "the man of lawlessness; the man doomed to destruction; he opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped and he even sets himself up in God's temple claiming himself to be God." We see, number one, that he is the man of lawlessness. Number two, he is doomed—the man doomed to destruction. Number three that he opposes God. And number four that he is a great usurper, trying to exalt himself above God.

Now, let's take a look at these. The first thing about the anti-Christ is that he is opposed to the law. He is the man of lawlessness. Verse 7 says: "The secret power of lawlessness is already at work." Regarding anti-Christ, one of the key things about him is that he is going to be opposed to law; to rules; to standards. Where there is a rule or a law, anti-Christ will want to smash it. And this spirit, Paul says, is already at work in the world. It will come together and be embodied in full measure in a person named anti-Christ, but his spirit is already active. A spirit of lawlessness typical of anti-Christ is already at work in America in 1993. Where do we see it?

We see it in the mood and mindset of people who hate authority. We see it in the bumper stickers that say: *Question authority*. We see it every time people say: Rebellion is really a good thing. They try to justify rebellion. We see it in the view of rules and the characterization of rules that are tradition as being stifling and oppressive and limiting and hypocritical. We see it every time someone writes about the traditional family and makes it the object of derision and ridicule. The traditional family is portrayed in the movies as the reason for all of our problems. And that traditional marriage between a husband and a wife is seen as oppressive and limiting. That we need to practice open marriages. We need to expand our definition of family to include every form and combination of human beings. We get to define the rules. We inject in it what we what we feel is right. We don't have to listen to, you know, the Bible or God or any kind of higher authority. We are the authority. Is there anything that is more characteristic of our society than its general spirit of lawlessness that reigns?

Look at the arts. The aim of art in a post-modern world is to smash rules and to test the limits of acceptability. If some people view those tests as irreverent—tough. If they are offended by our art, they don't have to look at it. Just pay for it. One critic reviewing the art exhibit of the artist who put a crucifix in a jar of urine

said that: "His work shows that the conventional notion of good taste with which we are raised is based on an illusion on an order that is no longer possible to believe in." We now know that art is in the context of incoherence and disorder. What we are challenged with is a very difficult task of rejecting all the rules.

The point is to reject the rules. It never ceases to amaze me how critics can give an intellectual justification for trash. Michael Medved who is a co-host of *Sneak Previews* recently wrote a book about the movies and popular culture called *Hollywood vs. America*. In the book, Medved, who is an orthodox Jew, talks about some of his fellow critics and the kind of critical acclaim that they give to total trash. He uses the example of a recent movie called *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*—maybe some of you have heard of it? *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, at the end of the movie, the main character is slicing off a piece of a human corpse that has been cooked and apparently displayed and basted. There is this scene of grotesque cannibalism. Through the movie, before that, he talks about watching a necrophiliac have sex with dead people; sex in a toilet; the mutilation and brutal killing of a nine-year old boy; a victim who is smeared with human feces; a woman whose cheek is run through with a fork; and on and on and on. He said, in short, the movie was unrelieved ugliness, horror, depravity at every turn, and then here is his line: "Naturally, the critics loved it." *The New York Times* hailed the movie as "brilliant." Two leading film reviewers gave it "two thumbs up." *Time Magazine* called it "excellent, exciting and extraordinary." Michael Medved said: "When some of our esteemed colleagues begin to use words like 'brilliant' and 'excellent' to describe this putrid, pointless and pretentious piece of filth, we decided we needed to respond."

What has become more and more typical of what has become of our intellectual culture in the United States is the justification of garbage. I remember listening to the CEO of *Time Magazine* who printed the Madonna sex book. Here is a book costing something like \$50.00 of Madonna writhing around nude. He was speaking about this piece of trash inveighing the founding fathers and the blood shed to uphold our first amendment freedom. He was putting the Time Corporation and Madonna in the category with John Locke, Thomas Jefferson and Montescue and all of the great philosophers from the past. I thought to myself: To assume or to suggest that the founding fathers of our country risked their lives so that a woman could appear nude wearing a crucifix while she is involved in all kinds of perverted sexual poses, is just pathetic. But this is the spirit at work in our country today. It is a spirit of lawlessness. A rejection of authority. A rejection of limits. A rejection of rules. A rejection of tradition. A rejection of the scriptures. And we expose ourselves, willfully and deliberately, to increasing dosages of lawlessness through our entertainment and what we do with our leisure time. We, who ought to respect law, use our leisure time to pop in movies that are nothing but celebrations of lawlessness and violence and a despising of sexual rules. And our children watch 15,000 hours of TV by the time they are 18, which is by and large characterized by this spirit of lawlessness. How do we spend our leisure? What spirit do we continually expose ourselves to?

Well, here is the man of lawlessness, the embodiment of this kind of thing. He is the man doomed to destruction, the doomed one. Without taking too much time on this point, I am personally gladdened by the thought that there is an end to this kind of spirit; that there are limits on evil drawn by God. This man's doom is sure. He is the doomed one. You know, it does seem that things are getting out of hand. But the whole Bible teaches that things never get out of the hands of God. The point of the book of Revelation is to show that evil, no matter how terrible it gets; no matter how awful the world gets, is always subject to the control of God. This is an important point, brothers and sisters. This man of lawlessness has limits on him. He is going to be revealed only when God permits him to be revealed and he will be on the scene for only a short time and then he will be doomed. In Martin Luther's words: "Lo, his doom is sure. One little word will fell him." He is speaking about Satan there and the animating spirit behind this person anti-Christ.

Martin Luther once said that Satan was God's devil. He hates being reminded of that. He is on a leash. However much he wishes to roar about and however much destruction he is allowed to create, he is still God's devil. God owns him. God controls him. One day God will destroy him. He is the doomed one. The anti-Christ is doomed.

The third thing is that he opposes everything that is called God or is worshipped. What you see about anti-Christ and the spirit of anti-Christ is that it is aggressively anti-God. Or another way to put it is that it is committed to the aggressive secularization of society. There is a mood among some people in this society to get rid of every single hint or shred of mention, no matter how minor, no matter how limited, no matter how minimal—to get rid of every single tiny scrap of mention of God in the public sphere.

For some the briefest hint of a prayer; at an acknowledgment of a dependency upon someone greater than us; at a brief statement of thanks for the good that God has bestowed on us, or on our country or on our families, is viewed with such complete horror and disdain. It must be swept aside. There has to be a thorough cleansing and sterilizing of everyone of our public institutions, less they be tainted with an acknowledgment of God.

I want you to listen to the statements of a school board president who prohibited a school teacher from meeting with other Christian school teachers before class—not with students, but other Christian school teachers before class for prayer, Bible reading and discussion. Students were not permitted to participate in this little group of teachers. During a court case in which the school board was attempting to prohibit this teacher from meeting with other teachers her own age, the school board president said: "It was quite possible that impressionable elementary school kids might actually see her carry a Bible to and from meetings in their school even if it is before classes. To children, teachers are very strong authority figures and therefore, school officials would be forced to make sure that no Bibles or other religious materials were left behind." Here is his concluding statement: "We don't want the children exposed to them." There is something dangerous, something positively harmful about even the

most innocuous exposures to the Bible as in seeing a teacher carrying one or put one in her purse, or have one in her desk.

You know, "the times they are a-changing," as Bob Dylan said. When I was in Russia just a few weeks ago, the team from Vineyard that we have over there was asked to teach a Bible class for all the middle school and high school students in a certain school—about seven hundred students. And the principal of this public school in Russia said to our team from the Vineyard: Now, I want to make sure you understand me. I don't want you teaching the kids ethics. I want you teaching them Bible. B-I-B-L-E. And so, twice a week in the fall some of the members of the team that we have over there are going to go into the public school and teach the Bible. In the U.S. there are school districts that prohibit teachers from calling the Christmas holiday, *Christmas*. They must call it the "winter break" or "spring break" because impressionable young people might link up the holiday with Christmas. Opposition to God and aggressive secularization will characterize the spirit of anti-Christ.

And, finally, there will be exaltation, an attempt to exalt himself over everything that is called God or worshipped, even setting himself up in God's temple proclaiming himself to be God. Now, this is absolutely key to your understanding of anti-Christ and the spirit of anti-Christ. It is not sufficient for the spirit of anti-Christ to simply be one of many voices or one of many options out there in the market place. The spirit of anti-Christ is not: You do your thing and I will do my thing and we will respect one another and live together in mutual peace and harmony. The spirit of anti-Christ is a spirit of domination. It requires the bowing of the knee to the spirit. It is a desire for lordship and control. It is a requirement that every single opponent be silenced; that every private thought or voice raised in opposition be stopped. It is the thought police taken to the nth degree. You may not have a contrary opinion. For only one is allowed to be acknowledged—the opinion of the anti-Christ. This will all be summarized in the totalitarian claim to be God. This figure will take his seat in the temple of God, demanding to be worshipped as God. The ultimate usurpation.

Well, there has been debate over the years whether there will be a literal temple, physical temple, rebuilt in Jerusalem in which this figure will march into and take his seat there claiming to be God. Some people believe that Paul is speaking of a spiritual temple, perhaps symbolic of the Christian church; and, others claim that he is talking about the literal temple. Well, I happen to believe that there will be a literal temple rebuilt in Jerusalem. That literal temple will be debased. As Jesus says there will be an abomination of desolation that that literal temple will be debased and desecrated when anti-Christ strides in there proudly claiming to be God.

But, brothers and sisters, as Paul says in verse 7: "This secret power is already at work in the world." This requirement that people do obeisance; that people bow to certain political currents and trends, that if you buck the system and if you have a Christian opinion, you are made fun of, you are considered ignorant and intolerant and bigoted and a know-nothing. That spirit is already at work in the world. It is just going to be brought into sharp focus and given power, totalitarian power, in the very last days.

In verse 8, Paul speaks about the rebellion. He says: "Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things and now that you know what is holding him back [he is talking about what is holding anti-Christ back] so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work, but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so until he is taken out of the way and the lawless one will be revealed and the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming." In verse 8 he repeats the idea that I spoke about before that this anti-Christ doom is sure. However long his reign is and there are differences of opinion in the Christian camp—if it is three and a half years or seven years or a briefer time—but for however long anti-Christ's reign is, he will be done away with, and I appreciate this, by the breath of the Lord Jesus' mouth.

Now, these particular verses are some of the most hotly debated verses in the church today. Who is Paul referring to when he says: "You know what is holding him back." And then, in verse 7, "but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so until he is taken out of the way." Who is now holding back the man of lawlessness, or what is holding back the man of lawlessness so that it will be fully revealed? There is a lot of debate and discussion about this, but I can tell you that it is these couple of verses that are a main foundation for the doctrine of the secret rapture of the church. A popular reference Bible named the Scofield Reference Bible, popularized a view that what is being spoken of here is the Holy Spirit. And it is the Holy Spirit who is now holding back the anti-Christ, but the Holy Spirit will be taken out of the way when the church is raptured and then all of this lawlessness will break out. Many, many people who have heard this view think that there is a verse in the Bible which says that the Holy Spirit will be taken out of the way. You know, it is very important for us to know what the text of the scripture says and then what is interpretation of scripture. Someone came up to me and said: Well, what about the verse that says the Holy Spirit will be taken away. Well, there is no verse that says that. That is an interpretation of this. And, I happen to not believe that the Holy Spirit is what is referred to in this passage. I find no verse in the Bible that explicitly says that the Holy Spirit is going to be taken out of the world before Jesus returns. I believe that Jesus, through his spirit, is going to be with us until the close of the age. "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." And, I don't understand how the gospel can penetrate the whole world and be effective if the Holy Spirit is withdrawn.

So, what do I think is meant here? I believe that the restrainer is the civil government. The reason why Paul was so enigmatic, so careful in choosing his words and why the whole thing is shrouded in mystery is because he was dealing with a hot political situation. He could not just come out and say: Oh, by the way, anti-Christ is going to rise up when the emperor, or anybody embodying civil government is thrown off the throne. That would not be a wise thing to do. Were he speaking of the Holy Spirit, I think he would have just come out and said: The Holy Spirit is going to be removed. But, he was dealing with a politically touchy situation that he told the people about beforehand, and now he is reminding them in kind of an enigmatic pattern that lawlessness will break out when government is swept away.

Think about this. The restraint on lawlessness according to the Bible is the law, it is civil government. There is coming a time when civil government will be just completely swept away. And there is going to be anarchy—a tremendous disrespect for law. Didn't we see signs of this in the L.A. riots? Haven't we, with our own eyes, witnessed what life can be like when the police and the law is swept away? Do we need a further evidence of what lawlessness looks like than what we witnessed with our own eyes just a year ago? Do you think that this couldn't happen over and over again on a grander scale? Just a complete breaking down of all restraints? Don't we see it in Yugoslavia today? We saw it in Lebanon; just complete elimination of the central government and lawlessness.

We see the breaking down of restraint in the area of sexuality. So that without restraints, sex can happen anywhere, at any time, with anybody—public or private situations. No restraints. When the restrainer of government is removed, lawlessness will be revealed for all that it is worth.

And then Paul speaks about those who will be swept up by the anti-Christ; swept along with it. Because he won't be just one person, there will be this mass movement following anti-Christ. In verses 9 through 12 he gives a description of the deceived—what I would call the people of the lie. Paul writes: "The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan, displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth, but who have delighted in wickedness."

The anti-Christ, will also, along with being lawless and opposing God, will also have some kind of supernatural anointing so that he will be able to work counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders. You know, this is a key verse for those who oppose the modern signs and wonders movement in the church. They say that it is safer to stay away from the whole thing. To get involved with the miraculous, listen, they say, doesn't the Bible talk about counterfeit signs and wonders and if there are counterfeit signs and wonders and church "A" claims to pray for signs and wonders, wouldn't it be safer and wise, prudent, to stay away from church "A" since there is a potential that you would be deceived, led astray, by counterfeits. And, anyway, you wouldn't know the difference between a counterfeit sign and wonder and a real sign and wonder, anyway. Right?

Do we really need to be afraid of the future? Do we need to be afraid that we will be swept along with this mass movement? That we will be so undiscerning? That we wouldn't know what was a real sign and a wonder from a false one that some charlatan will come along and be so slick and so deceptive and so clever that we would just sort of foolishly follow him? Do we need to fear that? To be afraid of that? My answer is absolutely not. Who will be deceived? Let's look at the text. Will Christians be deceived by this counterfeit? The answer is no. Verses 9-12 can not be speaking about Christians. Look at the description from the context of those who will be deceived. Verse 10, the signs and wonders will

be practiced in every sort of evil who deceives those who are perishing. Is this a description of Christians? The deception will happen to those who are perishing.

Let's read on. They perish because they refuse to love the truth and refuse to be saved. Is this a description of Christians? No. Christians are not people who perish because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved. Christians are people who love the truth and want to be saved. Verse 11: For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so they will believe the lie and so all will be condemned. Are Christians people who will be condemned? No. There is no condemnation for the Christian. They will not be condemned. And it goes on and says: Who have not believed the truth. We have believed the truth, they have not. But who have delighted in wickedness. Is this aimed at the Christian? Well, if you don't get it, let's read on.

Verse 13: But, we ought always to thank God for you, brothers, loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. You believe the truth. God chose you. God loves you. You know some people are so afraid of the work of Satan that they seem to attribute more power, more credibility in his ability to deceive than in God's ability to protect. You say that, you know, the counterfeit will be so slick, how can we discern, if we start exposing ourselves to the miraculous, you know, we are really opening ourselves up for dangerous stuff. That is not a biblical mindset.

The Bible says not, oh you will just be swept along, that you have no ability to discern between truth and error. The Bible says precisely the opposite. In speaking of the false prophets it says: You will know them by their fruits. Not, you will not know them. You will not be able to recognize them. You will know them by their fruits. Jesus goes on in Matthew 7 to say: "A tree can be known by its fruits." It can be known. We have this unbelievable fear and learned inferiority complex that we can not distinguish between what is false and what is true. If you are a Christian, you have been given the ability to distinguish.

John says in 1 John 2:20 "But you have an anointing from the holy one and all of you know the truth." Not you don't know the truth and you need to watch out. "But all of you know the truth. I do not write you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it. You know that no lie comes from the truth." The idea is this: you, if you are a Christian, can tell whether a miracle is a counterfeit according to the Bible test or whether it is real. The tests in the Bible are very simple. We judge the doctrine the doctrine of the one performing the miracles. Does the one performing the miracles hold onto the deity of Jesus Christ and his incarnation. John says this is how you can recognize the spirit of God. Every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ in the flesh has come from God. (1 John 4:2) Does the person who is teaching this hold onto the gospel message and essentially the key of the deity of Christ and the incarnation? If they deny the incarnation, if they deny Christ being equal with God, then you say: Away with that. That's a counterfeit.

We examine the fruit in the life of a person claiming to be a prophetic person or claiming to work miracles. What is the fruit? Do we see evidence of humility?

Do they give honor to God? Are they humble? Are they stealing money? What is the fruit? Is the kingdom being furthered? Are people being saved?

Not only what is the fruit in their life, but what is the fruit of their ministry? Listen, when thousands of people are being saved; when there is abundant fruit for the kingdom of God; when Jesus Christ is being glorified and acknowledged as the giver of the miracle; when pure doctrine is being preached, you don't need to worry about the miracles. In that kind of atmosphere, through that kind of person, you are going to see true miracles from the Holy Spirit. The notion that God is going to make it so confusing for us is really quite an attack on the goodness and faithfulness of God to his beloved children. It is not a divine shell game. People who will be deceived are people who love the lie.

It is not as if God is going to come to us on the last day and say: Well, I know that church had sound doctrine, I know there was fruit in that pastor's life, I know there was fruit in the ministry; I know that Jesus Christ was being acknowledged as God, but, oh well, that miracle was counterfeit, you should have known it. You know it. Truth and the counterfeit are plainly marked off in the Bible and anyone who has the Holy Spirit will be able to distinguish the two things. It will become very evident after a short while of observing a ministry, this thing is off, or this thing is on. You don't need to fear the miraculous. Indeed, in the early church, people prayed for the miraculous.

The people who are going to be deceived are people of the lie. It says in 2 Thessalonians 2 that "the people perished because they refused to love the truth and so be saved." You know, love for the truth is not just love for the big truth, like, I believe that Jesus Christ is God. He is who he says he is and he did come to die for the sins of the world. I think love for the truth is manifested in a love for the little truths. You can tell the character of a person, their essential character, by their willingness to embrace not just the big truth, but the little truths and, in particular, the little truths about themselves. Let me put it real plainly. You can tell a character of a person very well with how they deal with correction and with the truth about their own faults and errors being presented to them. There are many, many people that you can not tell the truth to. Have you ever met someone like that? A person that you can't tell the truth to? That any time you come a thousand miles near to the truth about them, they get offended, they bolt and run, they get defensive, they get angry, they hurl back in your face all of your faults. That kind of person is uncorrectable. They avoid the pain, according to Scott Peck in his book, *People of the Lie*, they avoid the pain of their own sinfulness and they become more and more evil because you can not talk with them about their faults. Now, when someone hates the truth about themselves and repeatedly rejects it so that they become uncorrectable, God turns them over. That is what it says here in 2 Thessalonians 2: "For this reason, God sends them a powerful delusion so they will believe the lie."

God's judgment follows on the heels of our choice. God never sends a lie to somebody who doesn't want to believe a lie. You get what you want. If you want the truth and you have an appetite for the truth and you are a consumer of truth, you will gain more and more truth. Over the course of your life, your life will be more and more characterized by embracing of truth and embodying the truth and

you will be purified by the truth and you will grow and grow to be a great lover of the truth. But, if you hate the truth and you defend yourself against the truth and you prevent the truth from ever breaking in, and you shut every door where light is creeping in, putting masking tape over all of the cracks; putting dark shades over all the windows, you will grow more and more to live in the dark. And you will compassed about more and more about lies. God will pronounce a final verdict upon you: Here live with the lie. It is often said that hell is God's final affirmation and support for man's free will. If you hate the truth, refusing to face the truth of who you are and what you have done, then God will allow you to be and have the kind of character that you have chosen.

But, that is not the way carved out for the Christian. And we are going to end with these verses. Verses 13-17 are Paul's reasons for believing in the stability and the security of those who have come to Christ even when hard times are ahead. He says: "We always ought to thank God for you, brothers, loved by the Lord, for because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel so that you might share in the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. So, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings that we passed on to you whether by word of mouth or by letter. May our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word." Paul begins with a word of praise. He praises God that despite the opposition that we might face in our lives; despite the lawlessness; all the terrible things that could come into our lives—persecution, when push comes to shove, God's got us. Paul is not pinning his hope on us; on our discernment; on our ability to know the difference between what is fake and what is real; he is not pinning his hope on well, the lawlessness won't be too great; that maybe we will live in a place that law will continue; he is not pinning his faith on maybe we won't be persecuted or on our ability to hang on by our fingernails. Paul is pinning his hope on the triune God. He says: I am quite confident when it comes to you believers and your future no matter what raises up its ugly head in the next four years, or eight years, or twenty years. No matter what happens to the global economy and no matter what happens to the national debt and no matter what happens in the area of lawlessness or sexual freedom, I am quite confident in your case because of God. He mentions God. He says we are beloved by the Lord. He mentions the Spirit. He calls our mind to reflect on the fact that there is a trinity. Then he goes beyond that and he says the reason that I am confident as I think about the trinity is because the trinity loves you. Then he breaks that love down and he says: "From the beginning God chose you. You were saved in time through the work of the Spirit and your belief in the truth; and in the future you will share in the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ." Will you think about this for a moment?

In eternity passed, you were chosen. The doctrine of election is a great ground of comfort for the Christian who is afraid of the future. You say to yourself: Wait a minute now, I did not choose God, God chose me. I don't know how you feel when you are chosen, but I think back to my childhood and the

situation where I was chosen for something good and that made me feel great. When I was chosen to play on a baseball team, or I was chosen class president, or I was chosen by a teacher for an honor, that made me feel great. Paul says: "Whatever you have been chosen for that is good, I want you to take that to the nth degree in your mind. You were chosen by God from the beginning to be saved." He voted for you. He voted for you. God elected you. He went into the voting booth and he put the little lever down and he put it down on your name. The reason why you know that he voted for you in eternity passed is because in time you believe the gospel. His voting for you, your belief in the gospel is working together so that in the future you will share in God's glory. All the bases are touched. The past, the present and the future and they have all been touched by God. This kind of praise leads to Paul's exhortation to the believer and to prayer.

Now, check it out. Paul doesn't start by exhorting the people to hang tough in a fearful time, he starts by talking about the greatness of God. You know the great anecdote for fear in the future is worship? Don't try to talk yourself out of your fears. It is not a matter of a monologue. It is not even an issue of your own lack of self-confidence. The reason why you are afraid of the future or afraid of this or that or the other thing is because you need to be a stronger person. No, you need to have a bigger God. The reason we in the Vineyard spend so much time in worship is because we believe that many, many problems are solved simply by the recognition of who God is; how great he is; how big he is; how competent he is; how strong he is; to deal with whatever life may bring our way.

If you are afraid of the future, you need to see who God is. As one person said it so well, he said: "My hope is not ultimately in my ability to learn. My hope is in the fact that Jesus Christ is such a great teacher. My hope is not that I can hear that well, it is that he talks so loud that I can't help but hear." Based on that, then, Paul exhorts us and says in verse 15: "So, then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings." See what he is doing? He is saying the ground is shifting around you, brother. You are being rocked about by all of your fears. Now, I have put before you something firm. Like a pole that has been run into the ground. When the gale force winds are blowing you about, you grab hold. What do we grab hold to? We grab hold to the traditions. That means the sure Word of God. It doesn't say: Come on now, buck up. Don't be afraid. Stiff upper lip. Hang tough, be confident in yourself. He says: You hold on to what I have nailed down to the ground. God's Word and a clear view of God.

Then Paul goes on and he prays. He praises, he exhorts and then he prays. In verse 16: "May our Lord Jesus Christ, himself, who loved us and by his grace gave us his eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you." Prayer is always, always, followed after praise. The reason why you can pray with confidence is because you have spent enough time in praise. We must gain a view of God in worship and in praise before we can pray with confidence. The Lord's Prayer begins: "Our Father, who are in heaven, hallowed be thy name." We recognize God before we ask God for things.

Why should you be confident in the light of all that I described today? Because if you have believed in the gospel, if you have trusted in Christ—that

means that the process was started by God in eternity—the process of faith was started by God in your life in eternity and in eternity past, God pointed you out. He looked at you and said: I want you. He grabbed hold of your life and in time he brought the gospel to your hearing and he gave you the gift of faith. He continues to blow into your life just to sustain your faith. He continues to draw you by his spirit to believe the truth and to continue to believe the truth so that in the future you might have a share in the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Who has done this? It is God. From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. Let's pray.