

A new pastor was out visiting his parishioners one Saturday afternoon. All went well until he came to one house. Although it was obvious someone was home, no one came to the door, even after he had rung the bell and knocked several times. Finally, he pulled out his card, wrote “Revelation 3:20” on the back, and stuck it in the door. Revelation 3:20 says: “*Behold I stand at the door, and knock: if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.*” The next day, as he was receiving the offering plate from the ushers, he saw his card in the plate. Below his message was written “Genesis 3:10.” Genesis 3:10 reads: “*I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked.*”

Today’s sermon is not about cute ways to quote Scripture to your friends. Even Satan quoted Scripture to Jesus during Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. But rather, my sermon today from Paul’s letter to the Thessalonian Christians is an attempt to do what Paul did: To convey the good news that God chose them (and us) to be saved through the work of the Spirit and through their belief in the truth (v. 13). The flashing red light in this passage is Paul’s warning that the *man of lawlessness*—also called the antichrist—can be so persuasive to convince “*those who are perishing*” (v. 10) of his claim to be higher than God.

Because Jesus has not returned in the last 2,000 years, the kind of evil that characterizes the antichrist has led some scholars to suggest that the man of lawlessness is not a person, but a kind of widespread attitude. Some deduce that the *man of lawlessness* about whom Paul writes is a kind of evil outlook on life that large numbers of people are influenced by that wreaks havoc.

Nevertheless, while Satan and the antichrist have a lot of power to cause widespread misery, this Sunday’s Scripture reminds God’s eternally loved people that God is still in charge and he will get the last word when Jesus comes back. God is, in fact, so good that Paul impresses people to compare God and the *man of lawlessness*. The apostle suggests that while the lawless one will deceive and thus destroy some people, God will, according to verse 1, graciously *gather God’s people to himself*. While the man of lawlessness will claim almost unlimited power, God will, according to verse 3, doom him to destruction. Now, while the antichrist will do evil in relative secrecy, God will reveal him “*at the proper time*” (v. 6). While the antichrist will do horrible things, God will eventually eliminate him. While the antichrist will set himself up as a god, verse 8 insists, “*the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.*”

So, we never have to worry about either missing Jesus' return or being overwhelmed by the man of lawlessness before it happens. We don't have to turn this Scripture into some kind of coded message about world leaders that we must decipher. Nor do God's children have to be afraid or uncertain about any of this. To recall a somewhat common cliché: *God's got this!* Followers of Jesus, no matter how flawed, have faith that is a clear sign of God's salvation and God's tenacious grip on us. God won't let his eternally loved people fall for the deceptions of the man of lawlessness.

Nor will God punish his adopted sons and daughters the way God threatens to punish those who have chosen to live in deliberately evil ways. God has called us, saved us, and graciously given us the gift of faith that believes God's truth against the antichrist's lies. "*So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter,*" writes Paul in verse 15. Jesus' friends can also look for ways to share those truths lovingly and humbly with those who have fallen for false gods.

Yet I wonder if the Holy Spirit might be using passages like this one to call the Church today to talk more about Jesus' return. It's tempting to become so busy celebrating his first coming that we are totally uninformed about his second coming, leaving us open to misunderstandings or plain ignorance about Jesus' return. Misunderstandings about Jesus first coming can be strange, but misunderstandings about his second coming may threaten our well-being. What I mean is that those who misunderstand Jesus' return may live as though he'll *never* come back. Or God's eternally loved people may get so nervous about how and when he'll return that we fail to fully grasp God's grace in the present.

Yes, of course, we should take to heart the Scriptural teachings about Jesus' second coming. The parents of a college friend of mine raised him to believe in a kind of two-stage return of Christ. They taught him to believe that Jesus would return first for his followers only, and then at some later time for the rest of the world. My college friend told me that he was especially frightened as a boy when he went shopping with his mom and he should get separated from her at the mall or the grocery store. After he went frantically searching for his mom without finding her, this boy was terrified that God had raptured her into heaven and left him behind. If I may, I want to contrast my college friend's childhood terror over being left behind when Jesus returns with Paul's promise that when Jesus returns, God's eternally loved children will "*share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (v. 14). We talked about sharing glory last week.

Some Thessalonian Christians to whom Paul writes seemed to believe that Jesus' second coming had already come and gone. Since they are still alive, they apparently worried that they somehow missed the boat! While that may seem like an irrational fear to 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, it's reasonable when we consider the circumstances of the Thessalonians to whom Paul writes. Most early Christians expected Jesus to return very soon—in perhaps only a few years after his resurrection and ascension to heaven. While Jesus had warned his followers against concocting any kind of timeline for his return, the first Christians seem to have often focused on the hints Jesus gave that his return was imminent.

In fact, at least some of the things that Jesus promised would precede his return had already happened not long after his ascension. Tyrants persecuted and even killed some of Jesus' first followers. Wars, earthquakes, and famines rocked the world that God so deeply loved. At least some of us modern folks have gotten so comfortable with Jesus' delay in returning that we forget how much, and how eagerly, his first followers expected it within their lifetime. Some of God's people are satisfied waiting for Jesus' return that we forget its anticipation has a prominent place in the faith of some of our persecuted Christian brothers and sisters. In fact, it sometimes seems that beleaguered Christians understand the nature of Jesus' return better than most 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians do, with not a hint of fear about the Lord's second coming.

So, Paul is responding to what we might call “fake news” of Jesus’ return. Through the Apostle, it’s as if Jesus is telling the suffering Thessalonians, “I haven’t come back yet. You didn’t miss it. Your misery isn’t a sign that God has somehow left you behind.” Paul declares that a sign no one has missed Jesus’ return is that “*the man of lawlessness*” has not yet fully unleashed his reign of terror. That hasn’t stopped some Christians from thinking that the man some call the antichrist has, in fact, already begun to reign. Historically, some of Jesus’ earliest followers assumed the *man of lawlessness* was a Roman Emperor who opposed the Church and claimed divinity for himself. Some Reformers even suspected that the Pope was the antichrist. In the past, people have identified Stalin, Hitler, and Mao as the man of lawlessness. A few have even identified certain American leaders as the antichrist. (Antichrist may be the one name that wasn’t thrown at a political opponent during this election cycle.) Yet while virtually all of those people who wreaked such havoc have died, Jesus still hasn’t returned. We continue to wait for his coming again.

While Christians sometimes put the focus on what 2 Thessalonians 2 says about this *man of lawlessness*, Paul focuses more on God’s nature. God’s *grace, encouragement and hope*, rather than the evil of the antichrist is this chapter’s beating heart. Paul includes a simple yet

brilliant summary of the gospel in verses 13-17: 1) God chooses us. 2) We respond to God. 3) God encourages us eternally. In the *New Living Translation* of verse 13 Paul says, “*We are always thankful that God chose you to be among the first to experience salvation—a salvation that came through the Spirit who makes you holy and through your belief in the truth.*” Gary Demarest says that “God is always portrayed in the Bible as taking the initiative in choosing people to serve him.” He chose Abraham and his descendants to be channels through which God makes himself known to the rest of humankind. God has chosen us, not just for salvation, but for witness and service in his name.

In *Fiddler on the Roof* you may remember that the father, Tevye, struggles mightily to endure the unrelenting persecution of the Russians by utilizing the power of *tradition*. In Christ Paul urges us to “*stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you.*” The Greek word *paradoseis* is literally “*hold fast to the traditions we passed on.*” I’m thinking tradition should be a more powerful force for us than it might have been for the Thessalonians because we have 1900 more years of tradition. The saints, the martyrs, and millions of common folks like us are shaped by the traditions of church and culture.

This doesn’t mean that all tradition is to be treated equally. Tradition is not a sacred cow, never to be challenged. The question of tradition was a critical issue between the Pharisees and Jesus. They chided him for breaking with some of their cherished traditions regarding the Sabbath and rituals associated with eating. But Jesus made a sharp distinction between “the traditions of men” and “the commandments of God.” We too should draw the line between these two views of tradition. Tradition can be regarded as “what we have always done.” Or it can be regarded as “the accumulation of wisdom.” Tradition based upon “we’ve always done it this way” ought to be challenged. Only when tradition is clearly the product of the wisdom of previous generations is it worth holding on to. Such is the wisdom that is ours in Christ. And Paul’s point is abundantly clear: 1) God chose you. 2) You must respond to God. 3) God will encourage you eternally.

The next time you hear a preacher say, “and in closing,” don’t be surprised if two or three more things follow. And in case I should ever say that, at least I know I’m in good company with Paul. Listen again to his immensely encouraging closing words in verses 16&17: “*May our Lord Jesus Christ himself 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.*” Write those verses on a card and give it to everyone you love. God chose you! Amen.