

The Great Apostasy

The End Times

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Bible Text: 2 Thessalonians 2:3
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We're opening God's word this morning to the book of 2 Thessalonians 2. We're going to read the entire chapter together. Now, this is one of the important passages in Scripture that deals with the signs of the coming of Jesus Christ. Just to put it in its context, you remember from last week when we looked at 1 Thessalonians that Paul wrote the book of 1 Thessalonians to correct some thinking about what happened to those who fell asleep in Jesus and he told them that when Jesus would come again, he would bring them with him and they wouldn't miss out on the final resurrection. But then there was another misunderstanding and now Paul is writing to answer that in 2 Thessalonians and that misunderstanding was that the coming of Jesus Christ could be at any time; that it was imminent and that didn't correct the behavior of some of the congregation who were lazy and who had put aside all their earthly responsibilities and become so spiritual minded that they thought, "Well, Jesus is coming any moment so none of the earthly things matter." So Paul is talking about them in this chapter because they were deceiving the people of God and causing disruption in the congregation and what he's telling them is, telling the congregation is not to listen to these false teachers who deceived them with teaching that there would be an imminent and soon and sudden unannounced coming of Jesus Christ without any signs, and he teaches that there will be signs. And two of the signs that he talks about in this chapter are: apostasy, the falling away; and the coming of antichrist, particularly antichrist but we're going to look at verse 3, the part of verse 3 that speaks of the falling away or apostasy this morning.

So let's read 2 Thessalonians 2,

1 Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, 2 That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. 3 Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; 4 Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. 5 Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? 6 And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time.

7 For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. 8 And then shall that Wicked [and it could read 'that Wicked One' in reference to the antichrist] be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: 9 Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, 10 And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. 11 And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: 12 That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. 13 But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: 14 Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 15 Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle. 16 Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, 17 Comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work.

We want to consider especially the part of verse 3 that says this, "for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first." And then that's further described, that falling away for us in verses 10 through 12 when it speaks of the antichrist coming and then false teachers and it says, "with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness." Then in the Gospel of Matthew 24:11 and 12, "And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold."

How do we know that Jesus Christ is coming? How do we know that the coming of Jesus Christ draws nearer? We know not only because time progresses and Jesus has promised us that he will come and so we get closer as time progresses to the end of time, but we also know because Jesus has given to us signs, signs of his coming, and one of those signs is apostasy, the falling away of many from the truth. In our series on the end times, we've been considering the signs of Jesus' coming. We established that there are signs. There are signs. Certainly, that becomes very clear in the passage that we read here. Paul's whole point is that there are signs and especially in the verse that we consider, "that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first." There will be a falling away before Jesus Christ comes and the language of verse 3 here matches the words of Jesus with regard to the main sign, Matthew 24:14, "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come." Both speak of the end coming and these two things that must take place: the Gospel must be preached in all the world; and there must be a falling away. So these are obvious signs of the coming of Jesus Christ.

We've described those signs. They are not like signposts that tell us the time or the distance to the coming of Jesus Christ; we mustn't predict the day and the hour when Jesus Christ will come, but these signs are like the signs of a woman in travail as Jesus describes them in Matthew 24. They foretell his coming, they prepare for his coming, they are due to his coming, and these signs are, in fact, the coming of Jesus Christ; his steps in history. We've seen that in the signs that we have considered. The sign of the preaching of the Gospel is due to the coming of Jesus Christ; it is the coming of Jesus Christ; it prepares for the coming of Jesus Christ; and it foretells that Jesus Christ is coming. That's true of the other signs: wars, natural catastrophes, and abounding iniquity; signs that we have looked at that take place primarily outside the church. These things prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ. They are the steps of his coming. They prepare for the day when he will return, and they tell us Jesus is coming so that we are not fearful.

This morning as we look at the sign of apostasy, we see the same things. This is, as I say, one of the most obvious signs, certainly it's one of the most obvious in Scripture. You have that in the passages that we read, especially in 2 Thessalonians 2, "that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first." When Jesus speaks of the signs of his coming, he begins with this in Matthew 24, "Take heed," he says, "that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many." False teaching is part of the sign of apostasy and when Jesus begins to speak of the signs of his coming, this is the first thing of which he speaks and he mentions it several times in Matthew 24: verses 4 and 5; verses 11 and 12; and then again in verses 23 and 24. "If any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders."

But not only is it in the teaching of Jesus, you also find it in the warnings of the apostles. Think of Acts 20 when Paul is speaking on the island of Miletus to the elders from Ephesus, he says, "I know that after my departure many false prophets shall arise among you." Or think of the words of Paul to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4, "The spirit speaketh expressly," that is explicitly, "that in the latter days some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of men." And so in 2 Timothy, the last book that Paul wrote, he wrote this in chapter 3, "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection," and so on, "Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof." And perhaps the chapter that speaks the most clearly and describes for us in the most comprehensive way false teachers in the last days, is 2 Peter 2. Almost the entire chapter speaks of false prophets and false teachers and is worthy of your reading today. Peter says, "There were false prophets among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction."

So it's clear from Scripture that this is a sign of the coming of Jesus Christ; that this will take place. But it is also clear from history and clear from our own day as we look around us, we see certainly as we look at all of history, that this is a sign of the coming of Jesus

Christ, that false teaching and apostasy have increased like the pangs of birth and labor. So as we come closer to the day of Jesus Christ, this becomes more obvious and more painful for the church, and certainly that's true in the day in which we are living. "Many," Paul says, "shall depart from the truth." There will be a great falling away. And as we look around at modern Christianity, certainly that's something that we can see and so we have to be aware.

That's the calling of Jesus, to watch. To watch for his coming so that especially in connection with false teaching, we are not deceived because they will come with deceit. We live in an age of sophistication and advancement and technology and good manners, and we're tempted to think that things are improving in the world in which we live and that's certainly the way it's presented but that's not the case and that's part of the deceit of the false teachers and the antichrist who is to come, and so we need to be aware and alert and take precautions. And then remember that Jesus Christ is coming. We're not just preparing for antichrist, that we're preparing for Jesus Christ himself and his return, and so we have to watch.

Let's notice this morning the great apostasy. That's the language of 2 Thessalonians 2:3, "that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first," a great falling away, a great apostasy. Let's notice what it is; second, how it comes; and then third, our calling.

We want, first of all, to understand the word "apostasy." What does it mean? What is apostasy? What does it mean to fall away? Well, apostasy is departure from the truth of the word of God by those who once, in a certain sense, held to that truth. Departure from the word of God by those who once, in a certain sense, held to that truth and were identified with that truth. And that tells us that apostasy is not something that we should think of happening outside the church; it's not something that happens in the world of paganism and atheism; that it happens to those who are known as Christians. They fall away. They once stood with believers. They once stood in the church. They once identified themselves as Christian. They once identified themselves with the truth of God's word and they fell away from the truth. That's clear from the word that's used in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 which is the same word that Paul uses in 1 Timothy 4 when he says, "many shall depart." The word is translated "depart" in 1 Timothy 4, and as "fall away" in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, and literally in the Greek, the word is "apostatize," and the word means "to not just fall away but to actively reject something that you once had." That's the idea. To stand against it; to oppose it; to hate it. It's the same word that's used in the New Testament for divorce, for putting away your wife. And so a man once loved his wife, he once stood with her, they were one in marriage, they were one flesh, they stood and made vows together and then he turns against her and says, "I want you out of my life. I don't want anything to do with you." He turns in hatred against the one with whom he once stood. Well, that's the idea of apostasy: active rejection of something that once was held to.

"Many shall depart from the truth." The outstanding example in Scripture is the Old Testament nation of Israel, the northern kingdom of the 10 tribes. You remember they came under Jeroboam to Rehoboam, the new king in Judah, and they said to him,

"Reduce our taxes. Make our load lighter." And Rehoboam's answer was, "My father was easy on you. I'm going to be even more difficult than he was." And so they rejected the ways of God. Not just Rehoboam and his rule, but in the end they rejected the worship of God in Jerusalem and they set up their own way and method of worship and they worshiped God through images and finally they departed wholeheartedly into the idolatry of the heathen nations around them and God destroyed Israel. They once stood with David. They once stood with the people of God. They once stood under the promises of God and they turned and they rejected and fell away from that.

Apostasy is departure from the truth of God's word by those who once, in some sense, were identified with that word and held to that truth, but apostasy is worse than just that because in the end, the essence of apostasy is this: departure from and rejection of Christ, salvation and the Gospel. In 2 Thessalonians 2 it says that they "received not the love of the truth that they might be saved," and therefore it says, "they shall all be damned." Christ is the Savior. That's what they reject in the end and, again, that's what happened in the kingdom, the northern kingdom of Israel. When Rehoboam said, "I'm going to make the load for you more difficult," then Jeroboam and the leaders and the rulers of the tribes said, "What portion have we in David? And we have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel. We're done with David. We're done with the house of David and the promised Christ that is to come in him." And they rejected Jesus Christ and the Gospel. That's apostasy, to fall away from Christ into destruction, damnation. They loved not the truth that they might be saved.

Now, that, of course, raises an important question for anyone with a Reformed understanding of the doctrine of salvation and a belief in the truth of the preservation of the saints and the perseverance of the saints. The question is: can one fall away from Christ? Is the grace of God then resistible? What about this important truth of the preservation of the saints? And the answer is: not this, that elect can fall away, not that those who were united by faith to Jesus Christ can fall away, that's impossible. Jesus Christ himself says that in Matthew 24 when he speaks concerning false teachers and their deceit. He says that, Matthew 24:24, "if it were possible, the very elect would be deceived." But it isn't possible. That's his point there in Matthew 24, and that's because of the word of Jesus in John 10, that no one is able to pluck those given to him from the Father's hand. It's impossible that one who is elect and joined to Jesus Christ by true saving faith can ever perish and fall away and be damned. Instead, those who fall away, fall away because they were never his. They were hypocrites. 1 John 2:19, John is speaking of apostasy and the teaching of antichrist and he says of certain that left the church there, "they went out from us because they were not of us." Then he says this, "for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us." Their departure reveals their hypocrisy so that even though they profess the truth and stood with the church of God at one point and said that this is what they believed, they never truly did; they never truly put their faith in Jesus Christ; they never truly were saved.

Now, that's important for us to see because it shows us that there is always hypocrisy and hypocrites among the people of God in the church. The tares among the wheat. And they will outwardly make a profession but, in the end, they will be exposed. They may grasp

the truth; they may argue for the truth, but in the end their confession is not real and not true. But it's also important for us to see because we don't have to fear or worry as believers that we will fall away from the truth. Yes, we have to watch but it's impossible for those united by faith to Jesus Christ, true believers, to depart and fall from Christ.

So that's apostasy: departure from Christ and from the truth and from the word of God and from the fellowship of God's people in the church by those who once identified with the church and with the people of God and, in some sense, held to the truth. Apostasy is falling away. Now, that can happen to an individual, that can happen to families, and it can happen to groups, churches and denominations. In 1 John 2, John obviously has an individual, individuals in mind. "They went out from us," he says. And the people in the church to whom John is writing know who they were that went out from them. John says, "they went out from us because they were not of us." They were hypocrites. They fell away.

It can happen to individuals and you have outstanding examples of that in Scripture. Think of Saul or of Judas. Saul, who was the king of God's people, who prophesied with the prophets, and he fell away. He was a hypocrite. He pretended. Or Judas, think of how surprised and shocked the other disciples were when he was the one who betrayed Jesus. They had no idea. There is a special sadness in that when somebody leaves like that. You think you know that person; you've had Bible discussions together; you've prayed together; you've sat in church with them. They have stood with you against the error and against false teaching and suddenly, or perhaps over time, there is departure. Think of the grief of Samuel over Saul. The grief of parents with a wayward child.

So it can happen to individuals. You witness that. This apostasy happens more often, though, in families, in the generations of families. Parents don't love the truth. They allow a little compromise in their home and in their personal lives. Little by little as the years progress, they become more lenient on things. Their children grow up without witnessing any love or any commitment to the truth and to the church. And in a generation, the family departs from the ways of the truth, in 30 or 40 years, just look at the book of Judges. This was the cycle over and over, and it's explained this way in Judges 2:10 that, "a generation arose that knew not the Lord."

Then it happens in groups, churches, denominations. A church that was faithful, that loved the truth, that preached the Gospel, that disciplined for sin, little by little, a little of the truth is given away; a little permissiveness creeps into the lives of the members and is overlooked; discipline falls away; false teachers come into the church to justify the ways of sin; and then a denomination, a church, becomes apostate. That was true with Israel, the northern kingdom. That's what's described in the process of which is described in the letters of Christ to the seven churches of Asia Minor. The first church lost her first love. It was a church that didn't discipline false teachers and tolerated them in their midst. Then there is the church from which the candlestick was removed and Christ's call is, "Go back. Repent." And the word of God is that in the last days there will be a great falling away; that many will depart from the truth; that the love of many shall wax cold. So this will be a full-scale departure and apostasy.

Now, what's important for us here is not just to inspect others but to be warned ourselves that we are not immune to this in our families and in our homes. We are not going to be kept in the truth in our own strength. Departure is departure from Christ and so we need to come back again and again to Jesus Christ. This is our first love. And that's the warning of apostasy. But now to see the seriousness of it, we have to understand how it comes, and if we are to battle against apostasy, we have to see the agents of apostasy. Apostasy comes through a waxing cold of love in the heart of the believer. Yes, apostasy comes in departure from the word of God in the church. Apostasy comes in departure in worship and the putting aside, the setting aside of the preaching of the word of God and the replacement with other things. But we're interested in the agents of apostasy because Jesus calls attention to them in his instruction. In Matthew 24, "false teachers," he says, "shall arise."

That's the first warning. The disciples asked, "What is the sign of thy coming, and when shall the end of the world be?" And Jesus said, "Take heed that no man deceive you for many shall come in my name saying, I am Christ, and shall deceive many." These are the false teachers. Verse 24, "There shall arise false Christ and false prophets who shall show great signs and wonders in so much that if it were possible they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before." The warning is not just to be aware of apostasy but to be aware of the agents of apostasy: false teachers who will come privily into the church.

Now, to understand what a false teacher, a false prophet is, we have to understand what the prophet is, and the prophet is one who is sent by God to speak the word of God, the Gospel, by which he saves his people. The word that the prophet brings is the word of the cross and of Jesus Christ; of the love of God; of salvation for sinners who believe. It's by the truth that we are saved, by the truth of the Gospel that's proclaimed, that God's people are saved. That's because in the end the prophet is Christ and the content of the prophet's word is Christ and the cross and the Gospel. He's the content of our faith.

And this is what a false teacher is: a false teacher is one who comes claiming to be sent by Christ and claiming to bring Jesus Christ but, in fact, he isn't sent by Christ and he doesn't come with the word of Jesus Christ, he brings his own word. Jesus says, "Many false Christs shall come saying, I am Christ. They will come in my name and deceive many." Paul says, "They will transform themselves into apostles of Christ and ministers of light." This is what makes the false teacher so difficult to deal with and so deceitful in the church; usually nice men, men with personalities, men with charisma, men who like people and who seem to be liked by people. The church falls in love with them. They become popular but they are, as Jesus says, "wolves in sheep's clothes," or as Paul says, "ministers of Satan." False teachers. It's because a false teacher, in the end, is against the Christ in whose name he claims to come.

He denies Jesus Christ and he denies Jesus Christ by promoting a religion and a Gospel which is all about man and which puts man front and center. That's the test, in the end. That's at the bottom of all false teaching. Our word and our faith is in Jesus Christ and

about Jesus Christ and every false teacher is a denial of Jesus Christ and the exaltation of man. Think of liberalism which came up in the last couple of centuries. It began with a denial of not just the miracles in the word of God but the miracle of the virgin birth; a denial of the authentic God-ship, divine nature, of the Savior, a denial of Jesus Christ. Think of the denial of Scripture as the word of God that followed and all the higher criticism which questions the word of God in the Scripture and says that the Scripture is of human origin which exalts man to be the author of this book. Think of the denial of creation, not just that God didn't do it but man is able to figure this out. He doesn't need to hear from God and by faith how the world came into being, but man by his science can discover these things and man and his wisdom and technology is exalted.

Think of the great heresies with regard to the doctrines of grace and salvation: Arminianism and Pelagianism. Arminius and Pelagius were popular men. The church fell in love with them but they were false teachers. They said, "Not Christ but man. Christ doesn't accomplish our salvation. He makes it possible, he makes it something that could happen, but it depends on the will of man, and man accomplishes his salvation by the exercise of his own free will and the exercise of his faith and his acceptance of Jesus Christ." Or think of the errors that come in regard to the doctrine of the church. The church rejects the rule of Jesus Christ and exalts a man, not just in Roman Catholicism and the papacy, but even in the modern day contemporary megachurch man-following religion that we see. Man. Or think of the errors in eschatology, not Christ's kingdom, not Christ's rule, not a spiritual kingdom but let's look for an earthly rule in which man and what we have in this world can be exalted. Or think of the contemporary moral issues in our society. Why abortion? Why homosexuality? So that man can have what he wants, his pleasures, man's choice. That's what's promoted. And the list can go on and on. This is false teaching. Rejection of the word of God, rejection of Christ and the Gospel and the exaltation of man.

And then the false teacher instead of coming in Christ's name and preaching the word of Christ and the Gospel of Christ makes himself the center. He becomes the celebrity, and isn't that the problem today? Instead of a biblical church in which there is mutual accountability and elders with oversight, there's a megachurch that follows a man and not only is it impossible to have discipline and oversight in the church, but a personality is followed.

And false teachers are motivated then by personal gain. They look at the flock, not as needy, not as something to serve, but something from which they can gain something, maybe riches, maybe fame, maybe influence, or sometimes something far worse. "False teachers," Paul says, "come as adulterers and adulteresses." So they make merchandise, 2 Peter 2, of the people of God. And in the end, it's to please the people of God; to please the people with what they want and not the cross and not Christ, but man is exalted.

That in the end, and that's the point in 2 Thessalonians 2, is the religion of antichrist, the exaltation of man. He will come as a man and say as he puts himself in the temple of God as God, "Worship me." And the false church and false teachers will say, "Worship the beast." That's the point in Revelation 13 of the two beasts, the one representing the

antichrist, and the other representing the false church which causes the whole earth to wonder after the beast, to worship the image of the beast. Apostasy sets the stage for the worship of the antichrist and the exaltation of man, and you remember, the number of man, 666. That's the religion of antichrist, man and the exaltation of man.

So false teaching comes that way through false, apostasy comes that way through false teachers that preach a religion not of Christ and the Gospel but of man. But understand the relation between false teachers and the followers of false teachers is a reciprocal relationship. How is it that false teachers receive a hearing? Well, it's because people don't know and people don't love the truth anymore. They want a religion of man. They want a religion that makes things easier for themselves. They want permissiveness. They want sin. The antithesis isn't clear anymore. They don't want the antithesis to be clear. They let the world into their lives and so they say, "Let's not hear a word that condemns this." They give heed to seducing doctrines.

And all the permissiveness and the immorality of the society in which we live today plays into this as well. Abounding iniquity spills over into the church and so it's this way as Jesus puts it in Matthew 24, in this order, "because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold." Sometimes we think of it the other way. We think, "Well, the love of people for the truth waxes cold and that's why iniquity begins to abound," but Jesus puts it the other way, "iniquity shall abound." Maybe people know the truth, maybe they hold the truth, maybe they defend the truth, but they let sin into their lives. So they live a double life, hypocrisy, and because iniquity abounds, they don't want to hear the truth anymore. Permissiveness slips into their life and then slips into the word and the preaching. They won't endure, 2 Timothy 4:3, sound doctrine anymore. They have itching ears. They heap up to themselves teachers to suit their own lusts and there is departure and they love to have it this way. Jeremiah 5, a wonderful and a marvelous thing has happened, Jeremiah laments in Jeremiah 5:30, and what's the wonderful and marvelous thing? This: "the prophets prophesy falsely, the priests bear rule by their means and my people love to have it so." So the great departure comes.

Now, again, there is a warning for us there, isn't there? The word of God is going to come and it's going to confront us and address us and we're not going to like what it has to say to us sometimes. If we have itching ears, we're going to want a word from the pulpit that never addresses us in our sins; that points outside to others but makes us feel secure in our self-righteous attitudes but doesn't address our hearts, doesn't address sins in our lives, in our families, in our homes. Now, we should want a word, not that's comfortable, but that's offensive sometimes; that brings us again and again in repentance to the cross.

So false teaching and apostasy come that way, by the agents of false teaching and then by a willingness of the people to have false teachers because they want permissiveness in their own lives. But there's one more thing to say about how false teaching comes and apostasy comes and it's this: that it's sent by Jesus Christ and that's the point of the verses in 2 Thessalonians 2 in the second part of the chapter where it says, verse 10, "because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie." And here's the point: God

sends apostasy; God punishes with apostasy; God gives the church over to apostasy. This takes place, I say, within the church, and God gives over families and generations and groups and congregations and denominations to apostasy. That happened in Israel. They said, "No more Jerusalem. Dan and Bethel. We'll build golden calves. And this is your God that brought you out of the land of Egypt. Worship Jehovah in these golden calves," and then the nation started to introduce other things so that not long later under the rule of Ahab, the entire nation worshiped Baal.

Yes, God sent prophets and they were his elect among them but in the end, the entire nation was destroyed because they didn't love the truth and God punished them and his punishment was, as Paul says, strong delusion. What's delusion? To be deluded is to think one thing when, in fact, the opposite is actually the case. It's to think that you're walking in love for God when, in fact, everything that you're doing is in opposition to God. That's what it is to be deluded. That's the punishment of God. They think that they are worshiping God. They think that what they're doing is God's will. They believe that they do God a service, they have a form of religion, they believe though a lie. They deny the power of God. Now, imagine that. They come to worship; they open their Bibles; they sing songs in the name of Jesus; they leave and they say, "Wasn't that a wonderful service?" The preacher gets in the pulpit; he opens the Scriptures; he uses biblical ideas; the people are invigorated and stirred up and they leave thinking, "That was wonderful," and they are not invigorated to worship and serve God at all. The elders of the church meet; they have their meeting; they say, "That was a wonderful meeting," and they leave. "Isn't there wonderful peace and unity in our church. Aren't we going in a marvelous direction?" And in fact, everything was against God, all in the service of Satan and the coming of antichrist. That's delusion and that's the judgment that God sends in generations. We're going to consider the second commandment this evening but God visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and he does that especially in regard to false worship. When the word of God is displaced by a Gospel of man, worship becomes man-centered, God visits a generation, sends delusion.

But now, understand there is comfort for us in that. The fact that God sends this means that Jesus Christ as King in heaven over all things controls this also as a sign of his coming. Apostasy doesn't happen apart from him and when we see it happening all around us, we don't throw our hands up in despair, we say, "Jesus Christ sends this. This prepares for the coming of Jesus Christ." It does it in two ways: it prepares the world and false religion for the rise of the kingdom of antichrist, but not only that, it fills up the cup of iniquity so that Jesus Christ can come, and in the end it serves as a sign for good of God's church and God's people because it puts before us more clearly the calling that we have.

As we watch for the coming of Jesus Christ, we have to love the truth. Love the truth. Why is it that God sends them a strong delusion here in 2 Thessalonians 2? Because they received not the love of the truth. Not just they received not the truth but they received not the love of the truth. In their hearts, they didn't love the truth. In their lives, they didn't love the truth. Apostasy doesn't come in a collapse of intellect, but apostasy comes when there isn't a love anymore. When the first love is gone. When our hearts love being

elsewhere. When our loves and affections are placed on other things. Christ, the truth, the word of God, must be central in our affections, and in a certain sense, apostasy helps us in this because it clarifies. The truth over against the lie, the truth stands out as the object for God's people to love. You think of the looming persecution and that will be a sermon coming up, but you think of that, and that puts God's people very clearly before the truth and the lie and calls them to vigilance to love as they watch for the day of Jesus Christ.

Then in our love for the truth, we must use the word of God ourselves to test false teachers. Here is the test: what comes out of the mouth of those who teach in the name of Jesus Christ. We have to love the truth, we have to love the Gospel, we have to love Jesus Christ as the essence of the Gospel so that we can know the truth. Like the Bereans, search the Scriptures ourselves. That doesn't mean we are suspicious of everyone who speaks in the name of Jesus Christ, but it means that we recognize that apostasy is never far away; that as Paul says, "false teachers shall rise among you." Wherever the word is, the devil will send false teachers. That's where his interest is, in false teachers coming.

These are the two apparent, obvious signs of the coming of Jesus Christ: this Gospel in all the world and a great falling away and then shall the end come. And the idea is that false teachers and apostasy attach themselves to the truths of God's word; there has to be the truth for false teaching to come. So we have to test. We're aided in Reformed churches with the confessions that we have which are a summary of the truth of the word of God that come to us from an age when the truth was very clear in the mind of the church. So we test. We test false teachers. But then our calling is also to diligently impart the truth and not just the truth but a love for the truth to the next generation. We prepare our children to watch. If apostasy comes in generations and if apostasy as a sign increases more and more as the day of Jesus Christ comes closer, then there is a greater urgency today than ever to teach our children and to impart the love of the truth to our children. But then we mustn't do that in fear either. That's our calling. Over and over Jesus says, "Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid." Because Christ is on the throne, the salvation of his elect is secure and sure, and the great falling away tells us he's coming and so when we see these things, we lift up our eyes and we say, "Come Lord Jesus." Amen.

Father, we thank thee for the way in which Jesus so clearly helps us to discern the times in which we live and to increase our hope and longing for the day of his return. We pray that we may be vigilant, watchful, but also diligent in the instruction of those that follow. Preserve us, we pray, in thy truth till the day of Jesus Christ. We ask it for his sake. Amen.