

Let No One Deceive You

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As Daniel 12:4 predicts, we live in a time of increasing knowledge. Data flows constantly around the globe, facilitated by communications satellites, the Internet, television and radio, newspapers and magazines, telephones, pagers, and a host of other means and methods. This rapid—indeed, almost instantaneous—flow of information makes possible the doubling of man's knowledge in just a few years rather than the decades it used to take.

Having such a sea of information available at the touch of a key or the click of a mouse makes some people uneasy. They may like being able to get a real-time update of their team's score or check the current price on a stock, but they hesitate to dive further into what seems to them an overwhelming deluge of facts, figures, and opinions. Though many welcome the constant high tide of information, many people feel swamped by it and frequently need to come up for air lest they drown.

One cause of this modern malady is contradiction. A news report says, for instance, that the American army met only sporadic resistance on the road to Baghdad and were greeted and cheered by most of the Iraqis along the way. Another report announces that U.S. forces were nowhere near their objective and, in fact, an Iraqi victory was certain and imminent.

To most people, the decision over which report correctly conveys reality is relatively easy, yet for some it is a dismaying choice. They have a difficult time determining which report to believe for a number of reasons:

1. They may be ambivalent about the sources, considering them to be equals, either in terms of morality or credibility.
2. Being thousands of miles away, they may say to themselves, "How can I know who is telling me the truth? I'm not there to see it for myself."
3. They may cynically believe that everyone has an agenda, and thus no one tells the truth.
4. They may be so uninformed in this area that they have no basis for making such a determination.

Additional causes of stress due to information overload are a lack of time to absorb what is taken in; an inability to detect "spin," "baloney," or satire; an awareness of increasing instances of "manufactured" news and "doctored" supporting evidence; and a deficient background in history, language, culture, economics, and politics, among others, to provide context.

It is no minor problem, and it has interesting and potentially devastating ramifications for us as Christians. We enjoy being able both to obtain and dispense God's truth so abundantly. Yet, paradoxically, the more information that is available, the more easily people can be deceived.

The First Seal

It is no coincidence that the first warning Jesus gives about "the sign of [His] coming and the end of the age" is, "Take heed that no one deceives you" (Matthew 24:3-4). In fact, warnings about deception are frequent throughout His Olivet Prophecy (verses 4-5, 11, 23-26, 48). The time of the end, it seems, will be one of falsehood and deceit.

In the book of Revelation, this same warning appears as the first seal, also known as the first of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse:

Now I [John] saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals; and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a voice like thunder, "Come and see." And I looked, and behold, a white horse. And he who sat on it had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. (Revelation 6:1-2)

Comparing Jesus' comments in Matthew 24 with these verses in Revelation 6, it becomes apparent that this horseman is not Christ proclaiming the true gospel but a counterfeit spreading the news of a false Messiah. For instance, this horseman carries a bow, but in every case, Christ is pictured with a sword (see Revelation 1:16; 19:15). Jesus interprets this horseman for us in Matthew 24:5: "For many will come in My name, saying, I am the Christ, and will deceive many."

The apostles frequently caution us to remain on guard against lies. Paul writes in Ephesians 5:6, "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience." In an obviously end-time passage, he warns:

Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means. . . . (II Thessalonians 2:1-3)

He continues later in the chapter:

The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. (verses 9-10)

Peter speaks of "destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed" (II Peter 2:1-2). He later predicts that "scoffers will come in the last days, . . . saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation'" (II Peter 3:3-4). The apostle Jude echoes these statements in his epistle (Jude 4, 17-18).

John warns Christians about deception being a hallmark of the Antichrist, signs of which were already popping up in his time:

Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. . . . I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. . . . These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you. . . . Little children, let no one deceive you. (I John 2:18, 21, 26; 3:7)

God paints the time of the end as a period of rampant deceit. His concern is primarily spiritual, since recognizing, knowing, and following the truth is absolutely necessary to our salvation. However, we must also be on guard against secular, political, and cultural deceptions because they can affect our approach and reaction to the truth.

God's Nation?

No example of this is so clearly recognized as is the belief of some devout and patriotic Americans that the United States—"the land of the free and the home of the brave"—is God's country. This idea runs the gamut from the simple belief that the U.S. is a Christian nation to the more "true believer" conviction that it is America's manifest destiny to convert the world to its way of life and usher in a new age of world peace and prosperity. If every nation were like America, the belief goes, the world would enjoy the Kingdom of God on earth—or something close to it.

America, then, becomes God's proxy here below, and all its activities—good, bad, or indifferent—are bathed in a heavenly glow of righteousness and glory. Wars and "police actions" are no longer considered to be "aggressive," "imperialist," or "unwarranted," but instead they are roundly supported as "just," "honorable," and "necessary." Domestic and international policies are presented with religious-sounding phraseology—"crusade," "reformation," "revival," and the like—and with quotations from the Bible and eminent religionists of history. Patriotism evolves from a voluntary and spontaneous feeling of pride in one's country to a Christian responsibility.

In most cases, this situation is more bearable than its secular or immoral counterpart. However, taken to an extreme, such national self-righteousness produces naked intolerance, ostracism, persecution, and murder of those who disagree or merely fail to take part. Historical parallels exist in Cromwellian England and Puritan America, as well as in various Catholic nations under the Inquisition and Protestant nations in the first blush of the Reformation.

This equation of national action and God's will is highly persuasive to those who are already accustomed to look for the hand of God at work in the affairs of men. With the application of well-crafted, inspiring rhetoric and deft spinning of events and outcomes—all nationally broadcast—it is not difficult for the leadership of a nation to sway millions to its righteous cause in a relatively short time. These days, it is easier than ever.

Technological Fakes

Politics is a fertile playground for this sort of manipulation. According to its website, the 1998 movie "*Wag The Dog* examines the blurred lines between politics, the media and show business." It is worth viewing just to see how easily news can be manufactured and events spun to produce a desired effect upon the public. The movie's make-believe, world-class fraud was orchestrated to deflect criticism from a president running for reelection.

Six years ago, scientists invented a procedure that allows them to put words in anyone's mouth.¹ All they need is a relatively small amount of video footage along with its sound track. By isolating phonetic segments in both audio and video, splicing them together, and smoothing the transitional facial movements and sounds, they can make a person say, on camera, just about anything. For instance, if they had a reason to do it, they could show former President Jimmy Carter giving a recent George W. Bush pro-war speech in his own voice!

As of now, this procedure still takes time. There are concerns, though, that with increased computing speeds and refined technologies that such manipulation will soon be done in real-time. Already, there is commercial application of a related technology in which one image is seamlessly integrated into another, usually into a live-action event like a baseball game.² Most television networks can now integrate in-game advertisements anywhere in the action where none exists in reality. Many advertisers have also combined historic footage with modern actors to make them seem contemporaneous.

However, deception does not need to be technology-heavy to be effective. According to British sources, the Bush administration's "disinformation campaign" leading up to the Iraq invasion succeeded in fooling even Israeli intelligence by breaking a fabricated story of the defection of Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz to the *DEBKAF* website.³ Within hours, Aziz appeared on television to deny the story, allowing American intelligence to get a fix on this high-level member of Saddam Hussein's regime and track him to the dictator himself.⁴ From this was developed the "target of opportunity" with which the war opened.

Some have postulated that some of the signs and miracles of the False Prophet will be technologically enhanced. Notice Revelation 13:13-15:

He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men. And he deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived. He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.

Technology has certainly progressed to the point that such conjectures are not outside the realm of possibility. However, we know from II Thessalonians 2:9 and Revelation 13:2 that Satan the Devil will give supernatural power to both the Beast and the False Prophet to carry out his designs. If these signs are somehow aided by technology, they will only be the more deceptive.

What To Do?

We need to remember that the deceptions of the last days will be difficult to see through. The False Prophet will be allowed to fool almost everyone on earth with his "lying wonders." Jesus cautions, "For false christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See I have told you beforehand" (Matthew 24:24-25).

How do we make sure we are not deceived? Obviously, we need to remain close to God. Jesus says, "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3). A thorough and deep knowledge of God—both intellectual and experiential—will go far in avoiding the deceptive traps of this age. When we truly understand the nature of God—what He is, how He thinks, what He does, what He purposes—we will know whether a statement or action is truly of God or of the Adversary.

Jesus also tells us, "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:36). This covers

two areas: 1) being informed and aware of events, and 2) communicating often with God by His Spirit. Discussing with God the day's events helps us understand His perspective on these matters and brings us into conformity with His will.

Finally, Jesus explains, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32). One can best spot a counterfeit by knowing the original. The more we study the truth in God's Word, the easier it is to recognize falsehood. Daily Bible study, minutely examining the riches of Scripture, will give us the education and training to know truth from error (I John 4:1; Isaiah 8:19-20).

We need not despair at the inundation of information we receive every day. God has given us a filter, His Holy Spirit, that enables us to see things through God's eyes and "will guide [us] into all truth" (John 16:13). If we have received the love of the truth and make use of God's Spirit, we will be able to recognize the lying wonders in the days ahead.