

Deceptions Of The Last Hour!

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Imagine receiving a counterfeit \$100 bill. I actually did receive one once on behalf of the church. It came from Namibia and we got it in an envelope as an offering, and I looked at it and I thought, this is the strangest thing. It just does not quite look right.

So I went to the bank and I pushed it across to the teller, I said, "I'm not depositing it yet, but is this real?" The lady took one look at it, and she gave me a funny look and I reached over and I pulled it back. She said, "Thank you so much. If I would have touched that, the Secret Service would have had to been called in and we would have had been filling out reports, you *and* I (talking to me), for about a week." And so I destroyed the evidence as fast as I could. But the thing about that bill was that it was thicker than the normal bill. So as soon as I touched it, I thought, this is not right, but it looks so real.

And so I just wanted to let you know about that incident, that it does happen and it happens quite often, and so we never know when we are going to have something like that. So go with your gut feeling if you think something is wrong with something like that, because they are out there. You know, at first glance, it looked genuine. It feels real, bears familiar markings, and might fool almost anyone. But hidden beneath the surface is a deception that makes it completely worthless.

You know what they say about those who train to look for counterfeit bills is they do not look at the counterfeit, like different counterfeits, they always look at the real thing. So a person in the government who is looking for counterfeit bills has only studied the real thing, because as soon as they see the fake, it stands out. It at least alerts them, if not stands out blatantly. So hidden beneath the surface of a deception actually makes it quite worthless, does it not?

Satan has always worked that way. His greatest weapon has not been open persecution. It has been subtle deception. He rarely presents evil wearing an ugly face. Instead, He disguises it as truth, righteousness, and even Christianity. And today countless people are fascinated by one question: Who is the Antichrist?

It is all over the Internet. People are naming people who they think in leadership are the Antichrist, and books are written, documentaries are produced, and endless speculation fills the Internet on these things. But what if that question has distracted millions from the far greater danger? What if the greatest threat is not simply identifying one future individual, but recognizing a spirit of deception that has been at work since the days of the apostles and is growing stronger in our generation?

Please turn with me to I John 2, verse 18. The apostle John tells us something surprising in a way, at least to a lot of people. Rather than focusing our attention on a single mysterious figure, he warns that *many* antichrists have come already, and would. His concern is not sensational prophecy. It is protecting God's people from subtle deception that can steal the truth, weaken our fellowship with God, and even take our crown.

Today, we will discover what John really meant by antichrist, why this warning is more relevant than ever, and how God has equipped us to recognize deception, to remain steadfast in the truth, and faithfully endure till Christ returns. Now here in I John 2, we are going to read verses 18 through 23, and in my Bible, and probably many of yours, it says Deceptions of the Last Hour, which is actually the title of the sermon.

I John 2:18-23 Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist [in some Bibles it has "the" but it is really not in the original] is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest [or exposed], that none of them were of us. But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. 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. Who is a liar

but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

So these verses must be read in context of the entire section from verse 18 to verse 28. In addition, even before analyzing the section, it is important to recognize its connection to what has gone before in John's writing. Now the apostle John's theme is that we must always bear in mind that placed as we are in this difficult and trying world, the great thing offered to us in the New Testament scriptures is fellowship and spiritual union with God—God the Father and God the Son through the Holy Spirit. So having laid the basis of fellowship, John has then gone on to tell us of certain things that may rob us of that fellowship, such as sin, including lack of love for God and loving the world. Then, having said all that, he goes on to make a further statement in verses 18 to 28.

But how do we fit it into the context here? Well, so far, John has been dealing with certain things within us that tend to disrupt the fellowship. One of our internal flaws is our failure to keep the commandments, or to love God and the brethren. Another flaw is our failure to heed the command not to love the world and to live according to its mentality and outlook. All of this in a sense addresses the possibility of failure inherent in every member of God's church. But sadly, we cannot stop at that point.

The dangers besetting us arise not only from within, but also from outside of us. In this section, John addresses the danger that always confronts us as God's people living in Satan's world. Certainly the danger he emphasizes here is one that arises within the church's life. In other words, we have not only certain things to watch as individual Christians, but also collectively, as God's people, we must be very wary of certain common general dangers to which we are subject as members of the church. And that is the theme John addresses here in these verses.

There is a great enemy outside us who, as he tells us later in the section, is trying to seduce us. And notice what he says in I John 2, now here in verse 26.

I John 2:26 These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you.

This is an outside danger, those who try to deceive you. So this refers to those who lead you astray, those who would entice you away from the truth towards something that is not the truth, even though it looks like it. There have been people in the church over the decades that have done that. They have led people out of the church with some personal topic or doctrine, or perversion of a doctrine, and they have led people astray, not realizing that they are doing the work of an antichrist, because they are neglecting God's truth through Jesus Christ and revealing it through the Holy Spirit.

It is the danger of being led astray by the great evil power that is searching to destroy the entire church and us, and that is the theme of this section, verses 18 through 28. It follows very logically from the previous exhortations. John moves from *us* to the whole atmosphere in which we live, our way of life.

For the sake of clarity, here is one way this section can be divided. There are three important points in this exhortation.

The first is the need to *recognize the nature of the spiritual conflict* in which we find ourselves. And this is the point of verses 18 and 19, and to some extent, verses 22 and 23. The second point is how we can *recognize the danger*, which is found in this specific message in verses 20, 21, and 27, where you find this written.

I John 2:20 But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things.

So this is the receipt of and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That is what that anointing is.

I John 2:21 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.

And then jumping down to verse 27.

I John 2:27 But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him [that is, in Jesus Christ].

So this is the teaching on the anointing and the earnestness of every member of God's church.

The third point addresses how to *avoid the dangers arising from this great spiritual conflict* that we find ourselves in, and the remaining verses in this section cover this very thing.

These then are the three great issues I just mentioned: 1) recognizing the character of the spiritual conflict; 2) recognizing the danger; and 3) recognizing the way to fight against and avoid it, thereby being protected from all its terrible consequences. And the faculty and power given to us by God enables us to recognize and avoid it.

This is a theme we encounter quite frequently in the New Testament, and there are many other instances of it. You will find it in II Peter 2, where Peter addresses the same issue. But a classic example of this appears in Ephesians 6:11-12, where Paul urges us to put on the whole armor of God. And why does he tell us that? Because "we do not wrestle with flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." So our battle and our resistance is against spiritual things, primarily, and our own human nature from the inside.

Now, the book of Revelation is in a sense entirely devoted to this issue. In other words, the New Testament is full of the profound spiritual conflict in which we as Christians find ourselves.

At this point, let us consider only the first section, the importance of recognizing the nature of the conflict. Now here in I John 2, we will again read verses 18 and 19 that apply to it.

I John 2:18-19 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. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.

We have two things to do to understand what John means here. First, we need to understand these terms: what is he warning about? Secondly, we must relate this danger to the dangers we face in our daily lives. How are we going to respond to it, and what are we going to do about it? And obviously the apostle John addresses it because it was discouraging for the first century Christians, and it would be all the way down through the ages to today.

So let us look first at the terms the apostle John uses. He begins by saying that this is the last hour, or the last time. Here again is a phrase you will find in many places in the New Testament. For example, the apostle Paul in II Timothy 3:1 writes, "In the last days perilous times will come." So this term is characteristic of the New Testament and its teachings so it is important for us to understand exactly what it means.

Some people have tried to shrug this off by saying it is merely part of the general error of the apostle John and other early Christians who believed Christ would return in their lifetime, and it still goes on today. Please turn over to II Thessalonians 2, verse 1. Since many early Christians believed that Christ would return in their lifetime, they fell into this trap. But the New Testament teaching itself shows that John and Paul had a correct understanding of the last hour, or the last time. Paul goes out of his way to teach the Thessalonians that we are clearly not to expect the return of Christ at any moment.

II Thessalonians 2:1-2 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.

So I am saying, beware of the things that are written out there, that are on the Internet, that you hear on the streaming or on YouTube, to be careful, because there are many people sounding like they are converted when they are not, because that is the way Satan works. So we are being warned to be careful even to this day with all of the technology that we have.

II Thessalonians 2:3-4 Let no one deceive you by any means; for that day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.

He says that certain things must occur before the Day of the Lord comes, and he warns them that there may be a long interval and that a great apostasy will occur. So Paul says, it is not coming as quickly as you think, and he immediately counters that tendency, and there are many other passages in the New Testament that do likewise.

Now the book of Revelation alone is sufficient to show that this cannot be dismissed as merely the common error of imagining that Christ's return was at hand.

But when we put together all the New Testament uses of these phrases, we are driven to this conclusion: the whole period from Christ's return—especially from His death, resurrection, and ascension, and the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost—the whole of the period from that until His final return is the last time. A whole period. It has multiple meanings in Scripture as well. Now, if you consider that in your individual life, that if you were to die tomorrow, this is your last time, you know, or years from now or whatever it might be. So the apostle John is emphasizing that we are always to be ready and expecting it, in a sense, spiritually for ourselves, that it may be the last time, but in reality there are many things that have to happen that are spelled out in the Bible that have to happen before Christ's return.

Sometimes the phrase "the last time" is used to refer to specific eras. There are times of particular crises and special judgment, and those times are in a

specific way the last time. In other words, in the Old Testament, many judgments upon the world and upon Israel that prophesied the final judgment pointed to *the final last time*. So the whole age is the last time, but also specific eras and epochs when sin and evil are especially severe and fierce. So the time just before the final return of Jesus Christ is, in a manner of speaking, the ultimate last time.

There have been periods and epochs in the history of the church, such as the terrible persecution of the early Christians, first by the Jews and then by the powerful unholy Roman Empire, and then came the Dark Ages where many were burned at the stake, and there have been other equally bad times. And for those people, it seemed like the last time. The right way, it seems, is to look at this whole thing and recognize that from the very beginning of God's church, there has always been this conflict. This mystery of evil, this mystery of lawlessness, as Paul called it in II Thessalonians 2:7, has persisted right through today.

Continuing on in II Thessalonians 2, we are going to read verses 7 through 12.

II Thessalonians 2:7-12 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. 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. For this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

So this has been an ongoing situation since Paul wrote this. There are times when the conflict is unusually fierce and severe, and the church is subject to especially terrible trial, but it all culminates in a final conflict of almost staggering dimensions that will be the immediate prelude to the actual, visible, glorious return of Jesus Christ.

Back in I John 2 and verse 18, if you will flip back there with me. There is one additional point I want to make about the last hour, or the last time. Listen to how the New Testament Expanded Translation by Kenneth S. Wuest paraphrases verses 18 to 19.

I John 2:18-19 (Wuest paraphrase) Little children under instruction, it is a last hour in character. And even as you heard that Antichrist comes, even now, antichrists, many of them, have arisen and are here, from which fact we know by experience that it is a last hour in character. Out from us they departed [that is, doctrinally], but they did not belong to us as a source [that is, of truth]. For if they had belonged to us, they would in that case have remained with us. But they departed in order that they might be plainly recognized, that all do not belong to us as a source [of truth].

Notice he adds the additional principle of character to this—a last hour in character. He is expressing the idea that any of us may die at any time. Therefore, this may be our last opportunity, our last hour, the final time to develop the character of Christ. So that seems to be what John means by the last hour, and that in turn brings us back to the next term he uses: antichrist, which appears only in the writings of the apostle John.

Let us notice the four scriptures where the word antichrist is found. One, we have already been to, but again, I John 2, verse 18.

I John 2:18 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 it is the last hour.

I John 2:22 Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son.

I John 4:3 And every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

II John 7 For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.

These scriptures were written by the apostle John toward the end of the first century, a time when there were many antichrists, as I John 2:18 states. Also, almost 2,000 years ago, John could say that the spirit of antichrist even now already is in the world. Notice I John 2:18 again.

I John 2:18 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 it is the last hour.

According to the Interlinear Bible, the word "the" is absent from the original Greek, and antichrist is not a proper name; therefore, it should not be capitalized. So in biblical usage, the term antichrist does not refer exclusively to a single political or religious leader who will soon arise. Antichrist deceives by teaching a false, unbiblical Christ. They alter the nature of God to suit their own ends and present that distortion as truth.

Many who have been in God's church over the years have fallen for this. We even had a group of elderly ladies, 20 some years ago, who would listen to the Sunday preachers every morning and get their fill of God's Word, and they just could not be talked out of it. It was so deeply ingrained—that is what they did their whole life—but they attended with us. And so I always felt sorry for them. I thought, well, God will work it out, because I do not think their hearts were intent on evil. It is just that maybe they were not called. I do not know.

But this is the danger we are looking at—the subtleness of these things, how easy it is to fall for a deceptive, enticing preaching. You or I, any of us could go out there and we could start talking about prophecy on YouTube and get followers, because the prophecy—just knowing what is going to happen in the future. So the deceptions are out there and they are constant.

The term antichrist, from the Greek word *antichristos*, indicates two distinctions. First, it means against Christ, that is, *one who stands against Christ in opposition to Him*. And the second is *one who stands in the place*

of Christ. So the second distinction is not merely that of one who opposes Christ, but in the ultimate sense of one who also presents himself as Christ, or an emissary of Christ, or a preacher of Christ, in an attempt to replace Him. Obviously one can oppose Christ without claiming to be Him. Generally, being an antichrist refers to someone who opposes what Jesus Christ represents, teaches, and is.

And that is how Satan works against the church. He infiltrates by stealth, making false doctrine appear logical, beneficial, and righteous in human eyes—human reasoning, traditions of men. Those are two light bulbs that should go off in your mind. Pride and self-righteousness lie at the heart of the motivation of those who become deceived. Now antichrists thrive on lying, to themselves first and then to others. Lying and deceit are defining traits of an antichrist.

Because antichrists are motivated by pride, they believe they are always right, yet because of their insecurity, they have no tolerance for anyone else. In this way, they brush aside God the Father and God the Son as irrelevant and inconsequential. As a result of this perspective, an antichrist is one who, in a sense, stands in place of Christ, taking the Christian name and opposing the very Kingdom of truth that it implies.

Now notice again what John says here in I John 2, verse 19.

I John 2:19 They [antichrists] went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest [that is, made plain to God's people], that none of them were of us.

So God exposes them for who they are to those who have His Holy Spirit, because the Spirit senses it. So when we think of antichrist, we should keep that in mind. John says that these antichrists who have risen went out from us, but they were not of us. In other words, they profess to be Christians, act as members of the church, and some even serve as teachers of the church, yet they are eventually separated from God's elect so that it is clear to true Christians that they are not of or with us.

Now, while claiming to enjoy and value God's truth and His people, they deceitfully and subtly seek to destroy the truth and the church. And there is no greater example in this end-time age, so to speak, than what happened to the Worldwide Church of God when God decided it had gone so far into apostasy that it had to be blown apart so that it could be freshened up, so to speak, or the truth reestablished.

Please turn with me to Acts 20, verse 29. You remember how in Acts 20 Paul warned the people of Ephesus that false teachers would arise among them and in a subtle way mislead and entice many away from the truth. And here in Acts 20, we will read verses 29 to 31.

Acts 20:29-31 For I [that is, Paul] know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

This has already occurred frequently in the greater churches of God and will intensify up to and through the Great Tribulation.

To summarize the teaching of this subject, there are things we can be certain of, though much remains uncertain. First, antichrists were already at work in the days of Paul and John. Second, although there have been many imitators of it, the greatest manifestation of the spirit of antichrist will reach its peak influence and power in the years preceding Christ's return. And the third and final point is that the epitome of this spirit of antichrist will ultimately be manifested in a single Satan-influenced, or possessed, entity.

Now, this is the very basic aspect of this, and what we have to realize is that in this present age we are confronted with such a power, both as individuals and as one great powerful order. The spirit of antichrist permeates and characterizes mystery Babylon the Great, meaning all of society. The society that Satan influences is characterized by the spirit of antichrist. Now the

danger at this point is oversimplification, but we can be sure that from the church's beginning to today, and from today until the end of this age, an evil power is at work in the world and against the church.

The apostle John wrote that the church has already been warned, "as you have heard that antichrist is coming." It seems that none of these apostles failed to warn the people against this danger, yet we often remain unaware of it. We do not think of it from day to day. We do not have our guard up continually. So the church is always confronted with this subtle power, a seductive power that presents itself in the name of Christ the Savior, and yet denies the true Christ.

Satan is a liar who denies that Jesus is the Christ and our only Savior. Satan and his conspirators oppose Christ, denying both the Father and the Son. And that is a broad brush that paints the attitude of the entire world, including those in cultural Christianity, but it especially characterizes those who deliberately deceive. So the specific characteristic of an antichrist that opposes us—not always openly, but often in a subtle way—is that they deny that Jesus is the Christ. It is amazing how many mainstream Christian groups (or Protestantism) deny that Christ was both God and man at the same time. They think different things, but none of it is the truth.

Scripture makes it clear that an antichrist is a deceiver who in some way denies that Jesus is the Christ. How does one deny Christ? And the answer is: by evil works. Matthew 24:5 records that Jesus prophesied that many would come saying, "I am the Christ," or I am a Christian. Paul told Titus that these deceiving impostors deny Christ by their works.

Titus 1:16 They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.

Many of these antichrists outwardly claim to be Christians, yet they refuse to submit to and obey Him. The works of their lives, what they say and do, are evil, and they are intent on teaching and promoting the traditions of men. And I have mentioned this before, that my experience with talking with people in mainstream "Christianity" (with the quotes around Christianity, of course) is that they always default to the traditions of men to overshadow

any time you point a scripture out that defies that. It is amazing how blind God has made them, because of their rebelliousness, or that they are not called at this time, or other reasons.

I John 3:24 (NIV) The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

So the Spirit of Christ, marked by submission to and obedience to God's law, enables us to produce good works, and this stands in stark contrast to the spirit of an antichrist, a spirit of lawlessness that opposes God's law and way of life.

There are two main manifestations that were prevalent during John's generation. There were those who said that Jesus was only a man, and that was the end of it—He was just a great teacher and nothing more. But there was also the subtle Gnostic error that held that the eternal Christ had come upon Jesus at His baptism and had left Him on the cross. According to them, the Son of God never died—it was the Man Jesus who died, and Christ had left Him before His death. They talk about Jesus but deny that He was the Christ. So that is Gnosticism, that has carried all the way down to today, where there are people that do abide by Gnosticism, or the Gnostic belief, or whose religion is influenced by it.

II John 7 For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.

So a denial of the deity of Christ is a manifestation of antichrist. Likewise, a denial of the humanity of Christ is also a manifestation of antichrist. There were some who taught that Christ had a phantom body, which is why John wrote in his gospel,

John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, and the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

And that is why John tells us that he and the other apostles had seen and touched Him. He says in,

I John 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life.

So this affirms the reality of Jesus Christ's incarnation, and it was not a phantom body but a real one. The Son of God died literally, and He rose again. We need to recognize that this tendency to deny that Jesus is the Christ has persisted throughout the church's long history as a subtle deception.

The church had to fight for her life over this doctrine in its early centuries. Then you find it in the Dark Ages under the Roman Catholic Church and its priesthood, false intermediaries between man and God. And then look back across the Protestant story, especially over the last 150 years, with their subtle denial that Jesus is the Christ—their denial of the miraculous and the supernatural, and the idea that Jesus is a great teacher or a great moral example, but not the Christ. Then we have the Jews, who will only acknowledge that Christ was a prophet, not the Messiah. These are nothing more than manifestations of these antichrists, of the ultimate great antichrist that is to come. Our responsibility is to warn of them to our own day and generation, just as John and Paul and the other apostles warned as well.

There is another, even more subtle way that many today deny Christ and yield to the spirit of antichrist. As you know, the Bible reveals that Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Messiah, must return to this earth with authority to establish a 1,000-year reign of peace, what we call the Millennium. If He does not return, as Matthew 24:22 states, no flesh would be saved alive—global extinction would be inevitable. Although Christ is the only hope for this earth, humanity, because of its enmity against God, has devised its own counterfeits, philosophies, religions, and systems of government that claim to offer alternative solutions to global society.

People believe that by channeling their resources, technology, and intellectual energy into solving the problems they face, they can find their own solutions to the world's ills. And so what do we have because of human

reasoning? We have the Green New Deal. Environmentalism, which is a religion in itself that casts God out and has Mother Earth and Gaia and whatever else they call her. This is also the spirit of antichrist—a denial of the necessity of the Messiah and His mission. People will find that their solo approach will fail miserably.

In its true biblical sense, the term antichrist has a broad application. It can refer to persons or powers, as well as attitudes and behaviors. The spirit of antichrist is present in individuals, institutions, religions, societies, and governments. Adam Clarke's commentary describes the spirit of antichrist:

Any person, thing, doctrine, system of religion, polity, etc., which is opposed to Christ, and to the spirit and spread of His gospel, is antichrist. Every man who opposes the spirit of the Gospel, and every teacher and writer who endeavors to lower the Gospel standard to the spirit and taste of the world, is a genuine antichrist, no matter where or among whom he is found. The heresies which sprang up in the days of John were the antichrist of that time. We may bring this matter much lower; every enemy of Christ, everyone who opposes his reign in the world, in others, or in himself, is an antichrist, and consecutively every wicked man is an antichrist. But the name has been generally applied to whatever person or thing systematically opposes Christ and his religion.

So an antichrist's primary work is deception, a trait Satan uses to undermine God's work. Satan's deception of humanity began in the Garden of Eden and continues to Christ's second coming. Satan, the dragon or serpent of Revelation 12, is the same serpent mentioned in Genesis 3. Thus, the thread of Satan's deceptive work can be traced without interruption from Genesis to Revelation.

Please turn to II Corinthians 4, verse 2. In fact, over the past two millennia since the days of the apostles, nothing has fallen outside the broad, stealthy influence of antichrist. And why? Because Satan is still the master conspirator influencing this world.

II Corinthians 4:2-4 But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God

deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing [that means those who do not have God's Holy Spirit; it is veiled to those who do not have God's Holy Spirit], whose minds the god [the eternal God] of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.

Since people in the world do not really believe that Satan is a roaring lion seeking who he may devour, they ignore his wiles and enticements. Yet we are to be sober and vigilant in resisting them. So prophecy hobbyists talk about a coming antichrist while ignoring the immediate spiritual crisis of sin, lies, and deceit that Satan himself instigated and encouraged. He is the father of lies, and those who think and act like him have the spirit of antichrist. Lies are always a major sign of the existence of the spirit of antichrist.

In Ezekiel 22, Ezekiel prophesied a systematic failure in society. In verses 6 through 12, he scrutinizes behaviors. Then in verses 25 to 31, he scrutinizes leaders. The issue is still impurity, spiritual pollution. This prophecy is almost a commentary on Ezekiel 7:20-27, in which the prophet, priests, elders, and king misled the city.

Please turn with me to Ezekiel 22, verse 25. The total effect of a web of deceit. These pillars of the community are perceived to be conspiring. Ezekiel accuses Israel of economic conspiracies and economic predations, like we have in Wall Street today, and of self-serving religious leaders who promote anti-God doctrines and even try to redefine the nature of God. Today we see trends in many cultural Christian churches that are promoting Islam by reading the Koran during their worship services. One new religion emerging from this is called "Chrislam." We see this religious syncretism in the subtle establishment of the one-world religion. And the spiritual conspiracy is directly hostile to Christ Himself, yet it is carried out deceptively in His name.

Here in Ezekiel 22, we are going to read verses 25 to 31, and remember the three sections that I mentioned earlier, that this prophesied a systemic failure in society. And so verses 6 through 12 scrutinize the behaviors of people, and then verses 25 to 31 scrutinize the leaders.

Ezekiel 22:25-31 "The conspiracy of her prophets [that is, influenced by Satan] in her midst is like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured people; they have taken treasure and precious things; and they have made many widows in her midst. Her priests have violated My law and profaned My holy things; they have not distinguished between the holy and the unholy, nor have they made known the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them. Her princes in her midst are like wolves tearing the prey, to shed blood, to destroy people, and to get dishonest gain. Her prophets plastered them with untempered mortar, seeing false visions, and divining lies for them, saying, 'Thus says the Lord God,' when the Lord had not spoken. The people of the land have used oppressions, committed robbery, and mistreated the poor and needy; and they wrongfully oppress the stranger. So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one. Therefore I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; and I have recompensed their deeds on their own heads," says the Lord God.

So that description could fit today, and what God is going to do about these things happening today. This accurate description of the antichrist mentality is accompanied by a list that includes everyone in society, from government and religion to the citizenry. God's righteous anger against them is poured out in proportion to their wickedness. The spirit of antichrist is blanketing the earth, holding nations and kingdoms in its grip. In this generation, various individuals will embody that spirit in powerful ways.

In times of national distress, men and women turn to other men and women who appear to offer solutions. Right now, no one seems to have a solution

for what is going on in the world, and things are just getting worse and worse with still no solutions, just human reasoning. The Bible specifically mentions two of these powerful individuals who will be virtually deified by mankind. One is called the Beast, and the other the False Prophet. The term antichrist is often applied to either of these prophesied personalities. Preachers and prophecy hobbyists confuse the two and impute some of the other's attributes to one and to the other, and they flip back and forth, and some even falsely blend the two into one.

Please turn to Revelation 17, verse 12. Let us briefly examine these two evil entities, the Beast and the False Prophet. The Beast in the book of Revelation is a powerful militaristic entity that will rule over ten nations, or geopolitical groups, in the years immediately before Christ's return.

Revelation 17:12 "The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have received no kingdom as yet, but they receive authority for one hour as kings with the beast.

That is an interesting statement there—ten kings who have received no kingdom as of yet. So are these leaders of the nations already, or leaders of territories already, or not? The question remains. Whoever they are, and whatever powerful people they are, the Beast gives them that power, or that kingship, over those ten kingdoms.

Revelation 17:13-14 These are of one mind, and they will give their power and authority to the beast. These will make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings; and those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful."

So there we are—spelled out in three different terms: called, chosen, and faithful. We certainly pray and are hopeful that it is the case; God will make sure that it is.

In biblical imagery, a beast symbolizes a political or military system, or its leader. The Beast attains its great power and authority when ten territory leaders will give their power and strength to the Beast, so they are temporarily made kings, or leaders, of ten territories. This Beast power is a

powerful group of ten ruthless individuals with a common agenda to depopulate the earth. Working hand in hand with the Beast will be the False Prophet, a powerful, miracle-working religious leader.

Now back one chapter to Revelation 16, verse 13.

Revelation 16:13 And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet.

So we see the antichrist Satan, the antichrist human political-economic leader, and the antichrist human religious leader. Each is possessed by an evil antichrist spirit and is driven by it.

Now, forward three chapters to Revelation 19, verse 20.

Revelation 19:20 Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone.

And as we know very well, that is not an eternally burning fire. It is a fire that burns anything thrown into it up instantly, and when there is nothing left to throw into it, it is extinguished, because there is nothing to keep it fueled.

Let us take a step back now. The False Prophet will command the obedience of millions through lying wonders and fake miracles. So we see the spirit of antichrist at work here, deceiving the world. You remember how deceptively powerful his religious predecessors are prophesied to be.

Mark 13:22 "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect."

Now turn back to Revelation 13. A false christ is simply another term for antichrist. If these religious predecessors are that deceptive, how immensely powerful will Satan's ultimate False Prophet be?

Revelation 13:13-15 He [that is, the False Prophet] 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 [the False Prophet] 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.

The apostle Paul calls the False Prophet the man of sin and the son of perdition, and this miracle-working individual, a great religious figure, will proclaim himself to be the Messiah. So flip back to II Thessalonians 2. Many will believe him to be Christ in the flesh. Remember, Paul describes the False Prophet to the church. We are going to read verses 3 and 4 once again.

II Thessalonians 2:3-4 Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.

Here we see the spirit of antichrist working powerfully in this man, completely taking over his mind and will. He is the last among many who will have stood in the place of Christ. The False Prophet is the epitome of the final, last-time antichrist, but there is still, you know, many antichrists.

Now back to the Beast. Recall that it will not be political craftiness alone that propels the Beast to power. The False Prophet will support and encourage his rise to power, and this False Prophet presides over a vast, multi-millennial religious system. This system is an image or copy within the religious sphere of the ancient mystery religions. It is a syncretism of the world's pagan religions and includes counterfeit Christian symbols. Satan, the master counterfeiter of God's truth, has always used symbols and icons in his deception to mark his followers, including obelisks, which we see in the major cities in the United States and also on the steeples of churches; crosses, which we see used in various forms, even to the point of the peace

symbol, which is an ancient Celtic symbol; and pentagrams, in the form of forts and symbols on buildings and all types of things where that claiming marks territories.

The Beast will be aided by the False Prophet in his rise to power. In turn, the Beast will use his political and military power to enforce religious uniformity. They will convince much of the world during the Great Tribulation that Christ is the antichrist, and because of this deception, many will refuse to repent and submit to Christ at His return.

Revelation 16:9 And men were scorched with great heat, and they blasphemed the name of God who has power over these plagues; and they did not repent and give Him glory.

So the idea of the antichrist as a single powerful individual at the end time has been promoted by false religion to prepare people for the deception that Jesus Christ at His return is the antichrist. It is used as a distraction and diversion from the many antichrists that have come into the church and from those in the world. It is meant to deceive, if possible, even the elect.

Just as an aside: it is very interesting, I think, that over the years the amount of hours that I have seen and heard of and told about, people who have spent trying to figure out who the antichrist is and who the False Prophet is and they have named this person and that person. They named him in the 1960s, when I first attended in 1963. There were many in that decade, and there were many in the 1970s, and there were many in the 1980s, and there were many in the 1990s. And as these people died off, they recalibrated and recalculated. I would think, what a shame that they wasted all that time trying to figure out who the antichrist is, when that was part of the whole deception—to try to get people to try to figure out who he is.

And it is the same way with calculating Christ's return. God says no man knows the day or the hour. Then why have so many people spent years trying to calculate it out? Now, it is not wrong to calculate some of these things in a general time—it is about the amount of time you spend. You know, we are interested in things that are happening in the world that seem prophetic, but they have been seeming prophetic for the 60-some years that I have been attending the church (just giving you a personal experience), and we have

been wrong every time. So we can only look at the general descriptions that there are of prophecies and who's who in them, without spending a lifetime trying to figure out who they are.

But at the same time, it is helpful to calculate some of these things. Three and a half years, what is going to go on in the three and a half years, how many days before the three and a half years does it say that the Tribulation starts, you know, the 1335, the 1290, the 1260—all these different numbers of days that coincide with three and a half years, and all these months that coincide with things like that. It is fascinating. I have a chart that spells it all out, as far as the church's best guess at it, but it is a pretty logical way of looking at it. It is the way we think of it, and it is our doctrine on how we have spelled out when things happen and that type of thing.

So if anybody would like a chart that explains the book of Revelation, just in an easy form, I will be happy to send that to you. So now I am going to get 200 emails. No. But I would be happy to do that. It was one that was produced when I was in the Worldwide—when I was in Ambassador College and it just appeared in some of the magazines that Worldwide had, and that sort of thing.

But anyway, it is fascinating. But we want to know what is going to happen to our future, and so it is a natural human tendency to do that. But do not spend your life, do not waste your life trying to figure it out specifically, because as soon as you do, then something will come up that will tell you you are wrong. But the church does have the general idea right, and the timing right. We just do not know who, and God is the one that is going to be allowing that person to rise up.

That was not in my notes, by the way, but I do want you to get the point of the sermon: do not waste your time on who it is. Just look over your shoulder, because the spirit of antichrist is always there, looking over your shoulder. [end of aside]

It will be Jesus Christ returning in power and glory who will decisively overthrow the Beast and the False Prophet, and they will be cast into the

Lake of Fire and consumed alive. Satan is the ultimate embodiment of the antichrist spirit. His antichrist rule over the nations will be forever ended at Christ's return.

Why does God allow these antichrists to be active within His church at times? In I John 2, these antichrists had been in the church, as we found—they even seem enthusiastic about the church and its members. It is very likely that they are among us today in the greater churches of God, and the apostle John says that antichrists have gone out from among us. However, some of the more devious antichrists remain and subtly cause trouble. So God allows this within the church to test the righteous.

Please turn with me to Psalm 11. Psalm 11 addresses this with a general principle. The psalm is intended as a response to the counsel others had given to David to escape, and it implies that he determined at that time, and always, to put his trust in God. They advised him to flee, given the circumstances, and he felt that doing so would have shown a lack of confidence and faith in God. So he resolved to persevere and to rely on God's intervention, which would come according to God's will and at the right time.

Psalm 11:1-3 In the Lord I put my trust; how can you say to my soul, "Flee as a bird to your mountain"? For look! The wicked bend their bow, they make ready their arrow on the string, that they may shoot secretly at the upright in heart. If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?

So David was forced to flee for safety on several occasions other than this. Being God's anointed king did not shield him from injustice and hatred. This psalm may have been written either when he was being hunted by Saul, as in I Samuel 18 through 31, or during Absalom's rebellion, which is recorded in II Samuel chapters 15 through 18. In both instances David fled, but not as if all were lost. He knew God was in control, and while David wisely avoided trouble, he did not flee in fear.

And David's faith stood in stark contrast to that of his advisers there in Psalm 11. Faith in God keeps us from losing hope and helps us resist fear. David's advisers were afraid because they saw only frightening circumstances and

crumbling foundations. David was comforted and optimistic because he knew God was greater than anything his enemies could bring against him. Continuing in verses 4 and 5.

Psalm 11:4-5 The Lord is in His holy temple, the Lord's throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men. The Lord tests the righteous, but the wicked and the one who loves violence His soul hates.

When law and order collapse, you will wish you could hide, but remember that God remains in control. His power is not diminished by any turn of events. Nothing happens without His knowledge or permission. And when you feel like running away, run to God instead in any circumstance. Run to God in faith and prayer. He will restore justice and goodness to the earth at the appointed time.

Let us flip over to I John 4, please. God does not always preserve us from difficult circumstances, but He tests both the righteous and the wicked. For some, God's tests become a refining fire, while for others they become an instrument of destruction. Do not ignore or defy the tests and challenges that come your way—they are growth opportunities. We are always being tested by God, in every trial and every blessing, to see where we stand. Here in I John 4, we are going to read verses 1 through 6.

I John 4:1-6 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

One of the approaches that Church of the Great God takes is that we do not go proselytize, try to get people from other church groups. We do not go out and try to drag people in from the world. We leave it to God to call people; He is the one who calls people. So by doing that, you get a much higher quality of people, so to speak, spiritually, than you would if you are dragging people off the street. But we put the Word out there, and God calls who He will. So we both have our responsibilities, but God is the one who ultimately does it.

The Spirit of Christ can also be called the spirit of truth. The spirit of antichrist can also be called the spirit of error. God has allowed antichrist among us to test our faith in our God and Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to test our defense of God's truth, and to test our loyalty to one another.

As we conclude, remember this vital truth: the apostle John did not write to satisfy our curiosity about prophecy. He wrote to strengthen our commitment to God the Father and Jesus Christ. His message is not one of fear but of faithfulness, not one of speculation but of steadfastness. The spirit of antichrist is real. It has been at work since at least the first century and continues to influence this world through deception, compromise, and lies. But God's people have never been called to live in fear of deception; we have been called to walk confidently in the light of God's truth.

John reminds us, You have an anointing from the Holy One, and He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. The same Holy Spirit that inspired the Scriptures dwells in God's faithful people, enabling us to recognize truth, reject error, and remain loyal to Jesus Christ. Our greatest danger is not failing to identify a future antichrist—it is *failing to remain faithful to Christ today*. Every day we choose whom we will believe, whom we will obey, and whom we will follow. Every act of obedience strengthens our loyalty to Christ. Every victory over sin prepares us for God's Kingdom. Every time we stand for God's truth, we declare that Jesus Christ alone is our Savior and King and our coming Lord.

Please turn with me to Revelation 3, verse 10. The world may become darker, deception may become more convincing, pressure to compromise may increase, but God's promise remains unchanged: Hold fast what you

have, that no one may take your crown. We are going to read verses 10 through 12.

Revelation 3:10 "Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial. . .

It is the hour of trial for each and every one of us, not knowing when we are going to die, but it is not *the* ultimate hour of trial yet—getting close.

Revelation 3:10-12 . . . which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. Behold, I come quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name."

Yes, this was written to the church in Philadelphia. It is full of principles, but it is a general principle for every firstfruit—that God is promising great things. Maybe not all these specifically, or maybe so, but this is so encouraging to realize that God has things prepared for us that we just cannot imagine the greatness of.

We must remain vigilant to guard God's truth and preserve it, and to persevere in applying it, because in a world of constant temptation, where the spirit of antichrist is at work throughout society, and even more subtly threatens the church, we do not want to be robbed of the crown we will wear for eternity.

So let us leave here with renewed courage. Let us guard the truth and cherish our fellowship with the Father and the Son. Test every spirit by the Word of God, and persevere faithfully to the end.

The day is coming when every counterfeit kingdom will fall, every deceiver will be silenced, and every antichrist will be destroyed. Jesus Christ will

return in power and glory to establish His everlasting Kingdom, and on that day those who have remained faithful will hear the words every Christian longs to hear: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Until that glorious day, may we stand firm, hold fast to the truth, and never allow anyone to take our crown. God has promised this to those who overcome. May God help each one of us to remain faithful to Jesus Christ, steadfast in His truth, and ready for His soon-coming Kingdom. So please look forward to a wonderful eternal life in the future.