

## **“The great apostasy” 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17**

**“Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore, God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.**

**But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first-fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.”**

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today for our reflections we have this section from Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to Thessalonians. There is so much intriguing stuff in that section, but we will mostly focus on one topic, on something very uncomfortable that I want to bring to your attention – apostasy and false teachers.

Perhaps that is the most uncomfortable topic for Christians. I have not pleasure preaching on this, but at least from time to time we need to bring this up, because all the authors of the NT warn us about it as in one voice.

Last Sunday we celebrated the Reformation Day. We need to see the events of that era with the eyes of the Spirit. Those were not simply historical developments. That was incredible spiritual revival. The explosion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

When the Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and taught in its purity all the falsehood is exposed, darkness has to flee, the power of lawlessness is restrained, and the Kingdom of God is triumphantly brought forward.

Last Sunday we watched the movie “Martin Luther: the idea that changed the world”. We were reminded of the incredible impact that the Gospel message had on the whole course of civilization.

The Gospel is the power of God to purify and transform. When the Word of God is proclaimed, it reveals the truth as it is and also creates a beautiful new reality. And the truth is that we are conceived and born in sin.

That desires of our hearts are evil from our youth, that we are enslaved by dark forces, there is no one who seeks God, not even one! we are all dead in our sins, rebellious enemies of the true God. We don't realize it and don't want to change it.

But the true God, the Creator, has never given up on us. He will not leave you to perish. You cannot scare Him away. Full of grace and mercy He has come to rescue us from our miserable state, while we keep fighting against Him.

He has come to free you, He has come to restore you, to recreate you, to give you a new heart, which thirst for the truth and rejoice in the fellowship with the true God, He has shown His incredible love and commitment becoming one of us.

He has taken responsibility for the mess we have created, and paid the ultimate price to save us. Jesus Christ sacrificed His life so that He could give you the most expensive gift – forgiveness of all our sins, victory over our ultimate enemy – death, and eternal life with Him in His New Creation, in blessedness and everlasting joy.

And He did all of this out of pure divine goodness and mercy without any merit of worthiness is us. This was the message that the Holy Spirit purified and delivered to us through the intense struggles of the Reformation era.

We have been privileged to receive this message. We haven't toiled to discover it; we haven't spent years and decades being pressured and threatened. We have received this sound message as a gift. I wish we were able to value it for what it is.

This Gospel message is the greatest power that restrains the mystery of lawlessness. And because it stands in a way of darkness, this message has been under attack since the beginning. But towards the end it's supposed to get worse.

As Paul describes it: **“For the last day will not come, unless the rebellion [apostasy] comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.”**

And this is where we come to this uncomfortable topic. Be ready! Jesus warns us: **“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”** (Matt 7:15).

Paul warns us: **“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”** (Acts 20:29-30)

Peter warns us: **“There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.”** (2 Pet 2:1-2) And so on and on...

In our today's reading – where will this man of lawlessness, this figure of anti-Christ, where will he sit? Remember? He will sit in the temple of God; he will sit and exercise the highest authority in the Church. Isn't that shocking?!

All these warnings are told to Christians about ... fellow Christians. “False prophets”, “among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things”, “there will be false teachers among you”, and so on.

These warnings are not about someone out there. All this has to do with the Church. Paul explains that the last day will not come, until the great rebellion, the great apostasy, or falling away has happened. Where will it happen? It can only happen among Christians. Muslims can't fall away from the faith in Christ.

Hindu can't fall away from the true faith, neither can Buddhists, or animists or those who say they don't believe in God. Only Christians can fall away. The great apostasy is about something happening in the Church before the end comes.

These are very unpleasant realities, but let us reflect on what is happening in the Church today. In 16<sup>th</sup> century the reformers believed that the office of the pope had all the signs of the anti-Christ. Popes sat in the temple of God, they elevated themselves above the Word of God, and deceived so many.

The pure Gospel message, brought forward through the Lutheran Reformation, greatly weakened the power of the lawlessness, it restrained it. The Gospel has this incredible power. But what is happening now?

Those are Lutheran churches, heirs of the courageous reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century that are falling away from the truth and embracing lies. Just a few examples. There are many Lutheran churches that are pioneers in embracing lawlessness.

There are many Lutheran churches that embrace sexual promiscuity in all the imaginable kinds, all the letters of alphabet under the banner of acceptance, inclusivity and love. Example, a practicing lesbian Lutheran bishop in Sweden who cannot tell which way is better – Jesus or Muhammed.

Transgender Lutheran bishop in US, who demands to be addressed with pronouns “they, them”. Probably because they are many. The whole legion... Lutheran pastrix in US, a tattooed celebrity lady, who calls for sexual reformation.

She instigates an art project where women are asked to mail her their purity rings which then will be melted into a sculpture of female sexual parts. By the way, she has been invited to speak to 1000+ Lutheran school teachers at Australian Conference of Lutheran Education in June 2017. And she was the only person our previous church-wide bishop quoted in his report to the Synod in 2018.

Yes, yes, you may say... but all those are people from other churches, not from ours, it's not so bad here. Perhaps... but how far behind are we, what do you think?

Pastor Mike Semler in his last address to the General Pastors Conference shared his main concern, which was – the rapid decline of Biblical knowledge among laypeople and pastors of the LCA. That was almost 10 years ago.

We haven't made a turn for better. We haven't even studied Scriptures in the last Pastors' Conferences. At all. We have played games, literary. That's what we did. And then we keep repeating the mantra that we all in the LCA hold the Holy Scriptures as our highest authority. Only our interpretations differ. Sure...

We keep repeating it, even as it is clearly demonstrable that that is not true. Example, a pastor who stands before his congregation and rebukes them saying that "you should not take the Bible that seriously." Yes, in our LCA!

Many denying not only the truthfulness of the first chapters of Genesis but of large parts of the Old Testament and probably of the New as well. There are many among our fellow LCA Lutherans who actively advocate for similar lawlessness that I mentioned earlier which is rampant in Lutheran churches in the West.

"Wolves in sheep's clothing". They use two approaches. "Sheep's clothing", meaning they try to appear innocent and harmless. "Wolves", meaning they will not hesitate to tear you in pieces if they have a chance to use force to destroy their opponents.

"Sheep's clothing" – they have to be attractive. As they don't bring the truth, but deception, they have to be likeable and appear as bringing something good and worthy of our support. Even the satan disguises as... yes, as an angel of light.

They have to use the language which is saturated with good words that confuses our ears and hearts. "We need to do this for the sake of love, for the sake of justice, for the sake of fairness." Examples in our culture abound.

Remember, how did we decide to destroy the institution of marriage? Yes, for the sake of love and equality. Why would we allow young children to take puberty blockers or even surgically mutilate their bodies, thus putting them on a path where there is no return? For their safety, for their protection and wellbeing. Of course.

The men of lawlessness do hide their evil deeds under the language of virtue. But then, look at what treatment receive those who dare to call out those lies. No tolerance, no hesitation, let's go for blood, as mercilessly as possible! Wolves...

The same two principles, sadly, we see employed in the Church. Have you heard anyone saying: "Let's ignore the Word of God, let's do what we want, let's bring in anti-Biblical teachings and practices, let's follow the world!" There would be no deception, and no support for such things.

But, if you mask the lawlessness using nice words like "let's do this for the sake of love, and unity, and peace, and mission", it may just work. It does work. That's how the deception happens. And when the opportunity presents, "wolves" don't hesitate to destroy those who dare to stand in their way. It is quite simple.

So, what shall we do? First, don't look at your pastors as somehow infallible pillars of truth. We all can and do make mistakes. We are as sinful as everyone else. We can be deceived and we can choose to embrace unrighteousness.

Where does it leave you? Actually, in quite a good place. The mystery of lawlessness is deadly for our souls, but the antidote to it is so good and enjoyable that it makes our hearts burst out of joy. Do as the Bereans did in Acts:

**“Receiving the Word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if those things are so.”** (Acts 17:11) Let the Word of God to dwell in you richly. Pray for your pastors, ask them to explain, if you hear something that you are not sure about. And we will be grateful to you.

And never forget, brothers and sisters, what Paul wrote: **“God chose you... to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this He called you through the Gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught...”**.

Whatever deceptive and mysterious the power of lawlessness, it has nothing on you. Jesus destroys this power simply with the breath of His mouth. You are on the right side, on the winning side. You have been chosen to be there.

You are called by the Spirit of God and the glory of Jesus Christ is already prepared for you. Therefore, stand firm and hold to what you were taught by the apostles. And, by the way, we Lutherans are doubly blessed.

We have received the Word of God, yes, but we also have received the sound exposition of Biblical message in the confessions of faith of the Lutheran Reformation, in the Book of Concord, which means, the Book of Unity. Let's use it!

Let's take the Small Catechism, for example. One of the purposes of the Small Catechism is exactly this – to protect us against false teachers in the Church. How would it work? What is the Catechism? A brief summary of sound Biblical teaching.

Now, whenever we listen to someone teaching or preaching, we should compare it with what the Catechism teaches. If we are invited to act against the Ten Commandments, or to believe contrary to the Apostle's Creed, or to pray differently than the Lord's Prayer teaches us, or to understand the Sacraments differently, or to ignore the Lord's instructions for our main callings, the Catechism will protect you.

You will be kept in the sound teaching that you have received. Our good Lord always wants to bless His people. Even in situation like ours. When the power lawlessness rises, we don't lose our heart, no! instead, we run to the Lord of Scripture, we study diligently, we pray for God's wisdom and protection and He will protect us.

You can be assured, as Paul wrote, that **“our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father, who loves you and gives you eternal comfort and good hope through grace, will comfort your hearts and will establish them in every good work and word.”**

And that is most certainly true. Amen.