

Rumors
2 Thessalonians 2:1-17

Some years ago, Dr. Albert H. Cantril, a professor at Princeton University, conducted a series of experiments to demonstrate how quickly rumors spread. He called six students to his office and in strict confidence informed them that the Duke and Duchess of Windsor were planning to attend a certain university dance. Within a week, this completely fictitious story had reached nearly every student on campus. Town officials phoned the university, demanding to know why they had not been informed. Press agencies were frantically telephoning for details. Dr. Cantril observed, “That was a pleasant rumor—a slanderous one travels even faster.”

And today you don’t even have to talk to someone face to face to spread a rumor - just post it on Facebook and it goes viral or leave a tip with an investigative reporter and the rest is history. Especially if what is shared sounds juicy or is demeaning of someone. My how quick our world is to share what makes others look bad. It is a sobering reminder that as a nation we have become more and more divided - more and more separated by our beliefs and our social classes. And rumors only fuel the fire.

This is not a new phenomenon. People have been talking and sharing half-truths since the beginning of time. Our scripture today is one example of how rumors caused tension in the early church - over 2000 years ago. Evidently there were those in the community of Thessalonica who were shaking up the community by claiming that “*the day of the Lord is already here.*”

Now we understand this concern because for centuries we have continued to hear rumors that the end of the world is imminent. As we approached the turn of the century we experienced a

resurgence of rumors to this effect. But these rumors are nothing new especially for American Christianity.

Consider the example of William Miller, a Baptist farmer from New York who was convinced that Christ would return to Earth in the early 1840s. With the assistance of Boston preacher Joshua Himes, Miller persuaded tens of thousands of Christians that the "day of the Lord" was at hand. Some followers even quit jobs and sold property in anticipation of the Second Coming. What came instead was the so-called Great Disappointment, and with it the discrediting of William Miller. Within a short time, however, Miller's shoes were filled by others who reinterpreted the texts, reworked the math, and issued new and equally assured predictions.

The first End Times best seller was not Volume 1 of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* series; nor was it Hal Lindsey's 1970s' blockbuster *The Late Great Planet Earth*. That distinction belongs instead to William E. Blackstone's 1878 book *Jesus Is Coming*, which was published in three editions and 47 languages. Since that time, waves of Last Days enthusiasm have swept regularly over portions of American Christianity. (-Craig C. Hill, "The end of the world -- again," Dallas Morning News, October 26, 2002.)

And so when we read scriptures such as this one in 2 Thessalonians many spend a great deal of time trying to identify who each person is in this passage and what they mean. But, my friends, to do that misses the whole point of this passage. For these were rumors - rumors that they understood because they had heard them firsthand and understood the underlying messages. But it is impossible for us to understand them for we do not have all the facts. We cannot figure out who exactly they mean or any details that help us for there is not enough information here. Even Augustine in his book *City of God* was forced to concede "I frankly do not know what he means" (Interpretation: First & Second Thessalonians, Gaventa, p. 108).

So what is the point of this passage. Paul was reminding them that rumors are passed along for one purpose - to misdirect people from what matters. Rumors unsettle us. They cause us to question what we have heard and seen and know. And so Paul's words are shared to reassure the community in Thessalonica - to refocus them on what really matters. He writes, actually begs them "*not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter.*" Evidently there were people spreading rumors claiming to know the facts, maybe claiming to have heard it from Paul himself or to have a letter from Paul containing this information and Paul wants to set the record straight. The rumors do not contain what he said or what he had written. For when he was with them he had warned them that they might hear these things. Did you hear his reminder in our passage?

"Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you?"

Paul had taught them the salient points when he was with them and even though we cannot figure out exactly what he had taught from what he says here they had heard it. So they knew what Paul had taught about the second coming of Christ. And so we turn to what we do know from what Paul writes.

First, Christ would come again but the apocalyptic countdown has not been triggered. The emphasis should not be on when it will happen but how we are to act in the meantime. And friends, what we know from experience is that when people become obsessed with the end times they live in fear and anxiety instead of faithfulness. Remember all the people who encouraged stockpiling when all the talk was about Y2K when the twenty-first century approached. Paul was warning against just this type of behavior. For when we become obsessed with the future we forget what is happening right around us. We forget to live as Christ calls us to caring for one another. We become obsessed with our own survival and forget the needs of the world around us.

And so Paul reminded them and this is what we need to hear today. *God chose you as the first*

fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. I love the way

J.B. Phillips paraphrases this verse:

God has chosen you from the beginning to save you to make you holy by the work of his Spirit and your own belief in the truth.

God has chosen us - you and me. We are saved for a purpose and that is that we might become holy. That is what sanctification means. To be made holy. We are chosen so that our lives might reflect Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit within us because we have come to know and believe the truth of the gospel. Our time and energy should not be spent worrying about the future for the future is in God's hands. We have been chosen to live holy lives that reveal the work of the Spirit within us and our belief in the truth.

An old-time evangelist explained that salvation involves the hand of God reaching down to us and our hand reaching up to grasp it. I love that image for through that connection with the one who chose us we remember that our lives are never the same again once God has grabbed our hand. For God never lets go of us no matter what happens in our lives. This is seen in Paul's benediction at the end of our passage when he prays that their hearts might be comforted and strengthened "*in every good work and word.*" That is what happens when we have grabbed hold of God's hand and claimed the gift of salvation. We become those whose lives are filled with good work and the good words of our God. For God's spirit is within us and through God's spirit and the hand of God we live as those who believe God's words of hope and promise.

God chose us and God calls us "*through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Paul was reminding them that God had called them through the preaching of the gospel. It is the gospel message that was shared. The message of

Christ's love, grace and forgiveness that changed their lives. The words of God that matter - not the rumors that are floating around - trying to get them to focus on other things. For the goal of salvation is participation in the glory of Christ that will be revealed in the future. But the way to participate in the glory of Christ Paul says is *to stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.*

We might wonder what the traditions were that they were taught. It is interesting that the word in Greek that is translated traditions means handed down. In other words traditions are what we hand down to one another. They are the beliefs that have been taught either from one person to another through oral tradition or in writing. They are what Paul had been teaching them about the good news of Jesus Christ and what his life, death and resurrection meant for them. What Paul had been writing to them and what we have to learn from today. For us to stand firm and hold fast we must remember the words of God and our task is to live by those words and to pass on the faith to others. We have to hold fast to what we believe, what we have heard and experienced but we also have a responsibility to pass it on to others. That is what we are called to do.

Rumors abound today that the church of Jesus Christ is dying - and statistics do tell us that fewer and fewer people are seeking a relationship with Jesus Christ through the organized church. But Paul's words are important for they are a reminder that we have a responsibility - a calling as God's chosen people to stand firm - to keep the faith and to pass it on.

To tell the story of a God who loves us beyond imaging. A God that sent Jesus Christ into the world for the salvation of all. A God whose spirit is alive and well and calls us into a sanctified life that will bring hope to a hurting world and draw others into the body of Christ. My friends, we have the power to dispel the rumors if we will just stand firm, hold fast to the good news of the gospel, and

share the good news with the world. The question is - will we?