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Title: Don't Be Fooled

Text: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17

Does May 21, 2011 have any significance to anyone? A little over 4 years ago, I believe in the spring of 2011, a story began making the rounds of all the major media outlets: a Christian broadcaster had announced that the end of the world would take place on May 21st of that year. My wife and I took our daughter, Jessica, on a cruise that year following her graduation from college. One of the first people I met on the cruise, upon finding out that I was a pastor, quizzed me about that very thing. I suspect he was particularly interested, in that, it was during our cruise that this was to happen.

This was no country radio preacher making these claims. His name was Harold Camping, and he had built his ministry, Family Radio, into a huge network of stations spanning the globe, a broadcasting empire with hundreds of thousands of listeners, with more than \$100 million in assets, and with an 8 figure revenue stream. The report was that Camping was pouring money into his end of the world campaign so that all would have a chance to repent. And he encouraged his followers to do the same. Many people quit their jobs and poured their life savings into publishing newsletters and purchasing billboards. When all was said and done, tens of millions of dollars went into the campaign.

And what happened? Well, May 21st came and went with no rapture of the saints. It was just an ordinary day that most of us don't even remember. If I hadn't been on a cruise, I might not have remembered it either. What most people didn't realize is that it wasn't the first time Harold Camping got it wrong. Back in the early nineties something similar had happened. Camping wrote a book predicting that Jesus would come between September 15th and September 27th, 1994. He sold thousands of these books on the air, but the predictions proved to be false. So what did he do? He changed the date and modified his message, moving it back a few years, again and again and again.

Finally, about a year before his death in 2013, he publicly apologized via his website for all his failed predictions. Harold Camping is not the first of his kind. Back in the seventies, Hal Lindsay sold many a book – *The Late Great Planet Earth*, *The Terminal Generation* and one called *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon*. In the nineties Lindsay wrote that Christians shouldn't count on being on planet earth after the year 2000. The fact is that books on the second coming are a profitable entity in Christian publishing, even though they have a limited shelf-life. That is, when you predict that Jesus is coming in 1988, for example, people stop buying your book in 1989. But it hasn't stopped publishers from cashing in when they can.

Throughout much of history, prophets have tried to predict the date of Christ's return. And, without fail, ALL OF THEM have been wrong. Some of these prophets are sincere in their convictions, but sincerely misled. Others I suspect were transparently self-serving, using their predictions to make money off of people. For this reason, the Bible clearly tells us that even though there will be signs in the final days, we shouldn't spend all our time chasing wild notions about the apocalypse. If you do, more than likely you'll get it wrong.

In the 50+ years that I have been following Christ, I have met a few believers who were disproportionately focused on the final days. They talk about it much of the time. They dig through the scriptures to find prophetic connections to most headlines and every major world event – and many minor world events. The problem is that these end-time fanatics become so obsessed with studying the last days that they rarely get around to living the Christian life. Another problem is that this kind of person is easy prey for the likes of those who prophecy a day of the Lord's coming – such as Harold Camping. Paul warned against this tendency in his letters – specifically in today's text.

We're in week two of a series from the book of 2 Thessalonians. It's about how to develop a faith that is strong, invincible, and impenetrable. In the first sermon of this series, we talked about what to do when life makes you a "sugar cookie" – and if you remember, being a sugar cookie is not a good thing. Life is often unfair, but if you have a bullet-proof faith, you've learned to look past today to what's coming your way. More than that, you've learned to live today as if all God's promises have already come your way.

Today, as we look at 2 Thessalonians 2, we'll talk about how to keep your head about you – even when those around you are losing theirs. We'll talk about how to practice discernment when you hear wild ideas coming from all places – even from Christian media. William Barclay referred to this chapter as "one of the most difficult passages in the whole New Testament," because Paul uses terms and references ideas that would have been common knowledge in the first century but are somewhat foreign to us. In this chapter Paul talks some about the sequence of events that will occur leading up to the second coming. I will tell you right now that the emphasis of today's message will not be on that

sequence of events, because there is an overriding principle in Paul's words that I want us to focus on. In the first century, Christians believed that the return of Jesus was imminent – that it would happen in their lifetime and could be any day now. Because of this, there was a great deal of misinformation going around – some opportunistic and unscrupulous teachers were exploiting people's fears and confusion by claiming that the day of the Lord had ALREADY come. There appears to have been a letter making the rounds, claiming to be from Paul, saying as much, and Paul wanted to set the record straight.

In 2 Thessalonians Paul talks about the sequence of events that must take place leading up to the second coming – and he urges the Thessalonians to use their heads when it comes to discerning the end times. He also tells them not to use the second coming as an excuse to lead an unproductive life.

Our generation has been called the information age – but I'm afraid that it could just as easily be called the MISINFORMATION AGE. There's a lot of nonsense floating around out there, and if your head isn't on straight, you'll find yourself believing a lot of things that are later proved to be quite silly. So, today I want to talk about three do's and don'ts for keeping your head about you in the midst of hysteria.

1. Don't be gullible. DO: Check everything before you believe anything. When some of the believers heard that Jesus had already come back – and presumably was living somewhere in the Middle East – they bought into it. They wanted to know where He was. Was He living under a disguise? Should they quit their jobs and sell their homes and go looking for Him? Paul said to them, in effect, "Not so fast. Think first." Listen to his words... *"Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction"* (vs. 1-3). Paul is saying, "Don't be gullible. Don't believe everything you hear. Before you believe it, check it with what you know to be true." You see, Paul had already taught them about the second coming, and all about the events that must occur beforehand. Now he's saying, "Weigh what you're hearing against what you already know." I could spend the rest of my time this morning giving examples of gullible people believing everything they hear and spreading it to everyone who will listen. Do you remember the global Y2K crisis we were supposed to experience? It didn't happen, but a lot of books – including books from Christian publishers – were sold, warning people about all the terrible things that would soon happen. Even today, all you have to do is open your inbox or look at your newsfeed on Facebook to see a great deal of misinformation. It amazes me how people who otherwise seem sane will believe the craziest alarmist claims, and pass it on to all their friends. What this does is create an environment of fear – sometimes even panic! Panic and fear are not conducive to living a life of faith. Listen to what Paul said to his friend Timothy... *"For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind"* (2 Timothy 1:7). The HCSB translates sound mind as sound judgment. This is what Paul is saying: Don't believe everything you hear. When you hear something that is too good to be true, or too bad to be true, check it out. Do some research. Weigh what you hear against what you know to be true – weigh every claim against the Word of God.

2. Don't forget how the story ends. DO: Remember who is in control. After Paul warns them about the difficult days ahead, he says... *"And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming"* (vs. 8). What's he doing? He's reminding them how the story ends. There are many believers in the world – preachers among them – who love to talk about how bad the world is and how much worse it's to become. You hear them talking, "Oh, ain't it awful? Things ain't what they used to be. People used to look out for one another, but not anymore. People used to be kind to one another, but not anymore. Used to be that a man could earn a good wage from honest work, but not anymore. Used to be that kids respected their elders, but not anymore. Used to be that everyone went to church on Sunday, but not anymore." And on and on. These people have an idealized view of the past, a pessimistic view of the present, and a fatalistic view of the future – it's hard to believe that they believe in an all-powerful God who is actively at work to redeem the world. And that's the very thing we must remember. We must keep this idea foremost in our minds at all times: GOD IS IN CONTROL! Don't forget how this story will ultimately end. In this life there WILL be trouble, that's true. You WILL face hard times, you can be sure. You WILL be treated unfairly, no question about it. You may even be persecuted for your faith. But that's not where your story will end. As Jesus said... *"In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33). And the apostle John said... *"For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith"* (1 John 5:4). It's hard to preach a gloom-and-doom gospel

and still be faithful to the scriptures, because the Bible makes it clear that our suffering is TEMPORARY, and our JOY will be ETERNAL. The Bible says that in the last days, evil will reign for a season – but only for a season. And then the kingdom of Satan will be destroyed so that God’s eternal kingdom can stand forever. THAT’S how the story ends. Don’t forget it! When you’re struggling through life, don’t forget how the story ends. When you fail and you fall and you wonder if you’ll ever get victory over sin, don’t forget how the story ends. Listen to what Paul said in today’s text... *“He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (vs. 14). That’s how the story ends. When people take advantage of you and manipulate you and use you and exploit you, don’t forget how the story ends. Remember that the Lord Jesus will overthrow the lawless with the breath of His mouth and destroy the works of evil by the splendor of His coming. That’s how the story ends. No matter how things look today, no matter how far behind in the count you may be, no matter what the scoreboard says at this point in time, don’t forget how the story ends. GOD IS IN CONTROL! You may say, “If God is in control, why is my life so difficult? I can only say that your life is difficult because LIFE IS DIFFICULT. It’s the way it is for everyone. The difference, however, is that those who are connected to God through faith in Jesus Christ are moving toward a victorious outcome!

3. **Don’t let go of your lifeline. DO: Hold on tight to the empowering truth.** Occasionally the police will find a murder victim, one that has been shot to death, with a unique injury: a bullet hole in his hand. When you see someone pointing a gun at you, preparing to pull the trigger, your automatic response is to put up your hand to try to stop it. And, of course, you can’t. No hand can stop a bullet. I’ve seen people try to do basically the same thing in the Christian life. They try to withstand the enemy’s attacks in their own strength, with their own hands. It never works. That’s why Paul spends the last part of 2 Thessalonians 2 encouraging believers to stay connected to their lifeline. Don’t try to do it on your own. Listen to what he says... *“So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter”* (vs. 15). I like the way the New Living Translation renders this phrase: *“Keep a strong grip on the teaching we passed on to you.”* He’s not just talking about doctrinal truths, he’s talking about the daily disciplines – the traditions – of living the Christian life. Let me tell you the best way to keep your head about you in the midst of craziness all around you. Stay as close as you can to the Word of God. Keep it front and center in your life. Develop the habit of a daily time alone with God, with just you and Him and His Word. Let Him speak to you. Let Him reveal His truth to you. Let Him show you how to think, how to act, and how to live. Paul goes on to say... *“May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word”* (vs. 16-17). Our lifeline is Jesus. He is our source of strength, our source of encouragement. The more time we spend in His presence, the more we seek to encounter Him in His Word, the stronger our faith becomes. We need to learn to seek the empowering truth – those truths from God’s Word that give us strength. There are many things that you could say are true – but they’re not empowering truths. Life is difficult. That’s the truth, but it’s not all the truth, and it’s not the empowering truth. The empowering truth is that life is difficult, and **this is the victory that overcomes life’s problems – our faith!** You will face trials and tribulations. That’s the truth, but it’s not all the truth, and it’s not the empowering truth. The empowering truth is that **in the midst of the trials and tribulations, God is with you, and He will give you comfort and strength.** There will be dark days ahead, somewhere along the line, for each and every one of us. That’s the truth. But it’s not all the truth, and it’s not the empowering truth. The empowering truth is that **weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning – and for followers of Jesus Christ, that morning will last for all of eternity!** If you want to develop faith that enables you to keep your head on straight in the midst of life’s greatest challenges, then don’t let go of your lifeline. Hold on tight to the empowering truth.
4. **Conclusion.** There will always be those who seek to market fear. There will always be those who seek to exploit confusion. And, there will always be those who try to direct your attention away from what God is doing in your life today, tempting you to play the game of speculation about what may take place tomorrow. Don’t take the bait. Don’t give in to fear. Don’t believe everything you hear. Weigh what others say against what you know to be true; weigh what you hear against the Word of God. Don’t forget how the story ends. God is in control. Most of all – this is what I want to leave you with today – if you want to keep your head on straight when everyone all around is losing theirs – **HOLD ON TO THE EMPOWERING TRUTH.**