The Battle for Truth

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[0:00] Just as it has taught you, remain in Him. Amen. So, we're thinking this evening about the battle for truth that John presents to us. There are, of course, battles that shape history, that shape the world as we know it. One such was the Battle of Britain in 1940. That was when Churchill famously said, never has so much been owed by so many to so few, recognizing the efforts of, in particular, the RAF pilots who stopped the German Luftwaffe, who stopped, prevented Germany invading Britain in 1940, being the time when the tide of war turned. And the fact that we have freedom and democracy today, in large part, we could trace back to that long summer of 1940.

Well, as we think about the battle for truth, as the Apostle Paul, as the Apostle John, rather, points out to us, this, of course, is not fought with bombs and guns, but it's a real battle all the same. It's a battle for truth about true belief in and about Jesus. And so, John writes to this church that's in the heat of the battle. It's a church that he loves. He calls them dear children.
And he's saying to them, you know, John's letter has a lot of you know language, you know the truth about Jesus, because you know our gospel message, and because you know what is true, remain in the truth. That battle for truth continues to rage on. Within the church throughout history, in every society and ours is the same, Christians and churches can be tempted under pressure to give up on, and perhaps we know churches where this has happened, key doctrines, doctrines about Scripture, as the Word of God is unchanging truth. Tempted to give up the reality of Jesus, fully God and fully man, the cross is the only way of salvation, the reality of people as fundamentally sinful, that sin is a serious thing, an affront to God, and that we need mercy and grace if we are to be saved. It can be tempting for Christians and churches to give up on those things. But if we were to do that, we would lose the battle. If we are to walk away from the truth, then we'd be in a place where the church would cease to be the church. We would have nothing to offer in a world that needs light and life. We would have nothing. The reality is the world needs, the world always needs, a church that passes the test of truth, that communicates truth to the world. And so John gives, he likes to give tests in his letter to assure us of true faith. He gives the test of belief. So we're going to see it, and we're going to see why passing the test matters. The first thing we need to think about is the Antichrist who is mentioned here, and to recognize at a basic level the Antichrist tells lies. Verse 18 again,
Dear children, this is the last hour, and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many Antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. And in this little section, John's going to do a few different things for us. He's going to give us a picture of this battle for the truth, and he's going to describe the behavior of those who are recognized as being Antichrist, and he's going to talk to us about their beliefs, and each of them matters. So to get the sense that this is a battle that's being viewed, he uses the expression, the last hour. So in the New Testament, we hear of the last days. Jesus will talk about the last days.
The other apostles will do that. The time between the first and the second coming of Jesus, just described as the last days. It's the last age of salvation. But here John talks about not the last days, but the last hour. And that's designed to say to us, here is a time when spiritual battle is really fierce. The last hour is a time when the forces of darkness conspire together against God's people. So we might want to think about a picture of a city under siege, of hostile enemies surrounding and seeking destruction. And he says to the church, this is the time that you're living in.
[4:47] And then he talks about their enemy, their adversary, as the Antichrist or Antichrists. It's only John in the New Testament who talks about the Antichrist. It's a theme in his letters and in the book of Revelation. But we meet a similar figure in the Old Testament, the book of Daniel.

There is one who sets up in the temple this abomination that causes desolation. He is the anti-God figure who has anticipated. But now he is described by John as the Antichrist.

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And we get this warning that even within the church, there are these figures who have been deliberately acting against Christ, actively denying Christ, they are now allied with the devil who is the Antichrist. So the question is, how can they be identified? So John writes to this church in Ephesus where this reality, this spiritual battle is going on. And so he writes to Satan, listen, here is how you can tell who are these Antichrist figures. Remember the idea of anti is against, if something is turned anti-clockwise, it was anti-gravity, it floats. Two things that he draws attention to. First, their behavior. So look at verse 19, they went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. End of verse 19, their going showed that none of them belonged to us.
So we can learn a little bit about these false teachers. We know what was going on in Ephesus at the time. There was these groups who were claiming, we have a secret knowledge that the Spirit has given to us. We have a higher knowledge. We are now above God's Word. We are above God's messengers. We understand the real Jesus. This is what the false teachers were saying. And so they have made that decision because they think that they're above the church. They've broken away from the church, and they've set up this new sect, this new group with this new teaching, and they're trying to pull others away. They are on the one hand attacking the church with their false beliefs, but at the same time, they're trying to draw others into their net and into their network. John says you can tell by their behavior that they never really belong to the church. So just to be clear, you know, when somebody leaves one Bible-believing, gospel-preaching church to go to another one, that's not what John is talking about. It's talking about people who deliberately are turning their back on Jesus, and more than that, are openly attacking Jesus, deliberately trying to destroy the church of Jesus.
And so John says the fact that they have gone has really unmasked them. You know, they were existing in the church for a time with that kind of hidden identity. We're getting to the season of Halloween.
[7:56] It's like they're wearing the Halloween mask, pretending that they are followers of Jesus. But John says they were never true Christians. Rather, they were wolves among sheep.

As Jesus would remind people in the Sermon on the Mount, not everyone who says, Lord, Lord, is part of the kingdom. And there were those within the church in Ephesus who had no love for Jesus, and that became clear because they walked away from Jesus and were actively attacking Him. So behavior, John says to the church in Ephesus, you can look at their behavior and you can see that they did not, they do not belong to us. But the other strand of evidence that he points to is their beliefs.
John, the apostle, he loves contrasts, light, darkness, those kind of things. But here the contrast is between truth and lies. So in verse 20, he will say to those who remain the true believer, you know the truth. But immediately he will speak about the liar. Verse 22, who is the liar?
The liar. The liar. What's the ultimate lie? Well, the ultimate lie that's being peddled by these false teachers is the denial that Jesus is the Christ. So they are going around teaching, no, God did not take on human flesh. No, the Son of God, the eternal Son, He did not suffer and die.
That He may have come upon the human Jesus for a while, but He left Him when He suffered. So they're saying Jesus is not the Christ. Jesus is not the Son of God. And John says this is the lie of the Antichrist. It is deadly serious. It is a denial both of the Son and of the Father.
[9:53] That's what he says in verse 22. It runs counter to the truth that John the Apostle has been telling us in his gospel, in his letter, about Jesus, the Word of God, the eternal Word who became flesh and made His dwelling to see Jesus is to see the glory of God. The Antichrists are denying that.

Now, what does John's message have to teach us today? Surely this reminds us that truth claims must be tested. You may well have heard the idea that all religions basically are the same, that all roads are leading up the same mountain. Or, you know, for anyone to claim that they have the truth is to be guilty of great arrogance. How do we respond to that? We have to recognize that it is simply untrue. As we focus on Jesus, the heart of our faith, we need to recognize that not all beliefs say the same thing about Jesus say the same thing about Jesus at all.
It's only Christianity that claims Jesus is truly and fully God, who became truly human, who truly suffered and died as the answer to the real and true problem of sin, that He truly did rise again in victory, that He will truly and certainly come back again as judge, that He is the one who will establish the new creation, that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus and no other way. Christianity is unique in those claims. All religions are not the same.

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And to claim that we have the truth is not arrogance, because Christianity requires us, doesn't it, to be humble, to acknowledge that we are sinful and we cannot save ourselves.
We place all our hope upon another, the Lord Jesus Christ. It's also important to recognize that our claims are based on historical facts, a real person, eyewitnesses, a real death, a real resurrection. [12:17] Our Bible is God's revelation, not human invention. So John is giving us a vital test of truth.

Is Jesus the Christ? Is He the anointed one, the promised one? Is He God's King and Savior? Is He Son of God? Is He God's answer to the human problem of sin?
And if a group, an organization, an individual answers no, then that's a denial of God's truth about Jesus. And that's why we must humbly and consistently say that while people hold on to their truth claims very sincerely, it is possible to be sincerely wrong. And other religions, other sects are wrong, because their view of Jesus is wrong. So truth claims must be tested. And related to that, truths about Jesus Christ matter. And we must as Christians, and this is really hard today, we must appreciate that truth, God's truth, must trump tolerance. If we are to love people well, it doesn't mean we say nothing. Rather, we must hold on to this truth, which is life.
Because as has been made clear by John in his letter and in his gospel, when it comes to the truth about Jesus, belief about Jesus, fellowship with God is at stake.
John is really clear that to know Jesus as He truly is, is to enjoy fellowship with the Father and the Son. If we love people and we want them to know God, then they must know the truth about Jesus. [14:18] And secondly, forgiveness of sin is at stake. Jesus must be fully God so that we can say that salvation comes from God. And we must also say that Jesus is fully human because we need Him as our substitute, as our representative, as our great sacrifice.

So that's the first thing that John wants us to recognize, that the Antichrist tells lies. Secondly, he wants to affirm and assure us that the Christian believers know the truth.
I am a relative newcomer to the wonderful world of podcasting. I really only listen to history podcasts. Dan Snow had a podcast on the Battle of Britain. It gave me lots of facts that I didn't know before.
So just to think about the Battle of Britain a little bit more, while Hitler was super confident, Hitler and Göring were super confident that the Luftwaffe would win the battle for the skies over Britain, and that that would then lead to this land invasion, Operation Seal. There's a wonderful podcast episode where Dan Snow tells story after story of the bravery of RAF crew on the ground, and also those men who flew the hurricanes and the Spitfires. While the enemy was circling multiple times a day, when the threat was real, these brave men and women held on fighting with courage and skill, and Britain was saved.
That kind of picture kind of can help us enter into, in some measure, what life as a Christian in Ephesus was like.
[16:14] To be a Christian in Ephesus was hard. Even before this point, if you remember back in Acts chapter 20, Paul had established the church, and he met with the elders, and he warned them that there was a time coming when wolves would come among them to seek to tear apart and to destroy the church. And now John makes clear to the people he writes to, you are living in that time. They have arrived. They are attacking. And so Pastor John, who loves this church, he writes to encourage them.

As you are faced with an enemy that is real, as you find yourself in the heat of the battle for truth, stand firm in what you know. He uses that language. He encourages them first about their behavior. So one thing that becomes evident from verse 19, that while the Antichrist people, they show themselves by the fact that they left, the true believers remained. John says, second part of verse 19, if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. He's writing to the church that has remained, therefore they belong. They share the same faith as the apostles. Christians abide. Christians remain in Christ and in His church. We read just one section from that farewell discourse that Jesus delivered to His disciples in the upper room. If we'd have gone to John 15, we would have heard Jesus use the analogy of the vine and the branches. I am the vine. You are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. There is this necessity for the believer to abide, to remain.
And the fact that they have remained speaks to the promise of God's grace. That God is so good and so powerful that His salvation is so sure that Christian believers will persevere to the end.

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Whether that's in North Korea, whether that's Eritrea, whether that's Ephesus, whether that's Edinburgh, held by God. Remember Paul's words in Philippians 1 verse 6, being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. [18:58] The difference between those holding on to truth and those believing a lie is that those who hold to the truth remain. He reminds them secondly about their beliefs.

Verse 20 into verse 21, but you, drawing a contrast between those with the false beliefs, the false teachers, but you, true believer, have an anointing from the Holy One and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it. Okay, so he's talking about an anointing from the Holy One. It's unclear whether that's from the Father or whether that's from Christ. But what's clear is when he talks about this anointing, he's talking about the Holy Spirit, that same anointing that the believers had at Pentecost, as Jesus had promised that He would send the Spirit, that He would be with them, that the Spirit would teach and guide and comfort. And the true believer has this anointing so that now we are united to the Lord Jesus. When we read God's Word, the Spirit helps to open our eyes so that we can understand that we can see Jesus. The Holy Spirit is at work in us, revealing the glory of Jesus to us and helping us to become more like Jesus. And another effect of this anointing is that from the Spirit comes the supply of grace from God so that true believers remain.
The Spirit is at work to protect and to give power, to enable the believer to stand firm. And because the Spirit has truly worked in their hearts, John says, you know the truth.
That truth is the truth that He delivered. He is an apostle, an eyewitness of Jesus. He's delivered the truth to them. We thought about some of that truth at the beginning. Wonderful words at the beginning of His letter. They know the true message of Jesus, that He is the Word of life, that He is the eternal life, that He was with the Father and has now appeared in this world.
That to know Jesus is to enter into fellowship with the Father and with the Son, that Jesus is the key to complete joy. Or to think about those words that He opens chapter 2 with.
[21:33] Jesus is our righteous advocate. He is the one whom God has sent and appointed to make atonement, to cover and cleanse our sin. Jesus is given to us as good news for anyone who will confess sin and trust in Him. And John can write to these believers in the midst of spiritual battle and can say, you know the truth. And you've been anointed by the Spirit and He's with you. And we're being reminded that the church of Jesus Christ is built on truth. And that's just to restate that reality that as a local church, we cannot afford ever to neglect God's Word. We cannot afford a mindset that we try and blend in to the city around us to make our beliefs somehow seem more palatable.

Rather, we're called out. We're called to be holy people, to be distinctly different. We're called to be a light in the darkness. We're called to live as citizens, not ultimately of this world, but to live as citizens of heaven. And so again, our city needs God's truth from us and God's love from us. And one of the wonderful things about being members of a local church, whichever church we're part of, we are tasked with helping one another to stand firm in these truths that we know, to speak the truth in love to one another, to walk with one another on this journey of faith, to encourage one another to fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus Christ.
One last thing for us to think about, and it's this, and it's huge. It's the reality that Jesus Christ protects His church. Before we get to our text, once more to go back to 1940 to the Battle of Britain. As historians kind of analyze, what was it that allowed the much smaller RAF to have a victory over the much larger Luftwaffe? Two things that Britain came to depend on for security and protection. One, the development of radar. So this was a brand new thing, which meant that rather than pilots just kind of aimlessly flying around, hoping to meet the enemy, radar would detect German formations from some 50 or so miles out. So they were ready. So there's the development of radar, but also, and obviously, the skill and courage of those RAF pilots. But the people of Britain, whether they knew it or not, they depended on those realities for their protection and their victory. As the Bible teaches us, and it does throughout its pages, that the Christian life is a battle. What are we to depend on? Who are we to depend on for victory and for freedom? And wonderfully, John makes clear that ultimately, Jesus protects His church. And He does that in what He has provided. There are two things that must remain in verses 24 to 27. Those two things that must remain are God's Word and God's Spirit.
And we have the truth that when we abide in God's Word and when God's Spirit abides in us, we will remain, that we will have victory in and through Christ. So we must, verses 24 and 25, remain in

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God's Word and recognizing, trusting in the true message about Jesus. As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning, from the first time you heard the good news of Jesus, see that it remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what He promised us eternally. So there's His encouragement to the church. Keep hold of the gospel, don't change it. Trust the authority of God's Word. Guard your doctrine, your truth closely.
[26:12] Pay no attention to people claiming we've got new insights, we've got new revelations, if they don't match up and line up to what the apostle has brought. For us as a church, it's a reminder, our beliefs rest on God's revelation to us in His Word, within the Bible, God's acts within history.

And in the context of the New Testament, we are also resting on the apostles, as eyewitnesses who saw the person and work of Jesus, and they interpret for us the mission of Jesus.
What's the significance of Jesus dying and then rising? We understand it from the apostles. And so we are to remain in the message of the New Testament about Jesus. And when we remain, John gives us this wonderful encouragement, we will remain in the Son and in the Father. We enjoy this fellowship with God, and we remain in what He promised us, which is nothing less than eternal life. That's both a quality of life where we know God right now, and a quantity of life forever in heaven and the new creation. If we remain in the truth, we remain in Jesus. We remain in fellowship with God.
So the Word of God must remain. And the Spirit remains, verse 26 and 27, in those who truly believe. I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. As for you, contrast again, the anointing you receive from Him remains in you. You do not need anyone to teach you, but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit, just as it has taught you, remain in Him. For those who are anointed with the Holy Spirit, John writes and says, the Holy Spirit speaks through His Word. He speaks through the message of the apostles. You have no need to be taught by these false teachers claiming higher truth and special knowledge. For us, all we need is found in God's Word, and so we are free, and we must reject the false claims of people who bring a different message about Jesus, who claim a different gospel.
[28:41] And what is it that the Holy Spirit who remains in us wants to teach us? Look at the end of this section. Just as that message has taught you, remain in Him. That's the key. The Spirit acts to bind us to Christ, that we remain in Him. It's the Spirit that enables us to see and to hold on to Jesus Christ, our hope in life and in death, to place all our hope for salvation now and for eternity in Jesus, the one who is fully God, fully human, and fully able to save us. We stand firm on Christ, the solid rock, because John says, when the Spirit remains in us, we remain in Christ. And so, in the battle for truth, sometimes a fierce battle, we look to Christ, we trust in Christ for victory.

Jesus, the one who came as the Word of life, Jesus, the one who was anointed and filled by the Spirit, is the one who saves, who defends, who causes His church to persevere from beginning to end.
And that same Jesus is the one who gives us His Word, the truth of the Bible, the promises of the Gospel, and He gives us His Spirit, the strength, the comfort, the presence we need. And so, we need both realities. We need this personal experience of Jesus in His Word and through His Spirit. And when we have Christ as our Savior, as our protector, as our King, we have the guarantee that we will overcome in the battle for truth.
To encourage us as we close, I like to read the Heidelberg Catechism every now and again. This morning, I was reading Catechism number 54, which is just so apt for this text. So, as we leave this text, we do so confessing what it proclaims to us. So, let me read the question, and then we can all read the answer together. What do you believe concerning the Holy Catholic Church? Answer, I believe that the Son of God, through His Spirit and Word, out of the whole human race, from the beginning of the world to the end, gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself a fellowship chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And I believe that of this church,
[31:43] I am and always will remain a living member. Great summary of what John has been teaching.

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