

January 19, 2025

THE LAST DAYS AND GOD'S PRESERVING GRACE

2 Timothy 3:1-9

(5 of 8 in a series through 2 Timothy)

Winston Churchill became prime minister on May 10, 1940. Three days later, with the assault of Germany pressing against England, he gave a stirring speech to the House of Commons. In one particularly moving portion, he declared, "You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival."¹

You may have heard that speech before. It is particularly well known for Churchill's declaration that they would wage war by sea, land, and air or his ending statement that he could sum up England's aim in one word: victory. But what gets lost sometime in that stirring speech is the warning that he gave those listening to him on that day. He didn't paint some rosy picture where they would easily defeat the enemy with little or no cost to themselves. Rather, he painted a gloomy picture of the difficulties that awaited him. Right before the portion I quoted he said, "We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering."

Now, if his intent was to rally the country for the battle ahead, why would he begin by saying that they have a grievous ordeal before them that would entail many, many long months of struggle and of suffering? I mean, isn't that kind of thing demoralizing? Indeed, a message like this could be demoralizing. However, when you're leading a people into a war, your aim is not only to stir up their passions but to prepare them for what's to come. They needed to go into this war with their eyes wide open, lest they find themselves shocked or caught off guard when the battle is difficult or goes on for a good while. Churchill was preparing his people by telling them why they could win while also letting them know the reality of the difficulties they would face until that day of victory came.

I think Paul does something similar in 2 Timothy 3:1-9. After walking through how to navigate false teaching and unsound doctrine that arises in the church, while trying to bring those going astray to a place of repentance in 2:14-26, Paul opens this section basically saying, "Now, lest you think these struggles are a one-off, let me help you understand that struggles and difficulties will always accompany you in ministry." He wants Timothy to know that prior to the Lord's return,

¹ Accessed at <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/blood-toil-tears-sweat/> on January 14, 2025.

there's no utopian state about to arrive around the corner. And he tells him this to prepare him so that he might be strengthened and not caught off guard by the difficulties to come.

Well, likewise, as pastors, we're charged to prepare the churches we pastor to walk well in this age, and so I want us to take note of what Paul says in this text so that we too might be prepared to live in a Christ-honoring way until Jesus returns. Therefore, I want to work through this text guided by three realities we must take note of. The first of these is that we must understand the nature of the days we're in

We must understand the nature of the days we're in

Paul begins the text we're looking at this morning telling Timothy, "But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty" (v. 1). Now, when we first look at this, if we think of the "last days" as simply the last few days in this age before Christ returns, then this makes little sense. Why would it be helpful to say this to Timothy when it's about a time so far outside of his lifespan? I mean, we're reading this almost 2,000 years after Paul wrote it, so Jesus didn't come back in Timothy's lifetime.

But Paul is not referring simply to some time period right before the return of Christ. He's referring to this entire time from Jesus' resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost until his return on the last day. In other words, the entire time that Timothy lived and the entire time that we're living in are the last days.

This is regularly how the Bible refers to this age. I could point to many texts to show this, but I'll note just one. Remember Peter preaching on the day of Pentecost? After the Spirit descended on Jesus' followers that day, Peter stood up, quoted where Joel says, "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17), and he says this to explain what was happening in that moment. In other words, Peter is saying, "The last days that Joel prophesied about are now." And, so from that point to the present, we've been in the last days. It's a designation for this entire time between Pentecost and Christ's return. But there's something Paul wants Timothy to know about these days in which he was living (and in which we live now). Paul tells Timothy that he wants him to understand that in these last days "there will come times of difficulty."

What Paul is saying is this entire age will be filled with times of difficulty. Now, the difficulty may be more intense in some seasons than others, no doubt. History has borne this out. And perhaps that's why Paul says, "*times* of difficulty." And Paul is not alone in making a declaration like this. In Matthew 24, Jesus mentions that this age will be filled with wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, false prophets, tribulation, and many walking astray. Jesus makes clear that this entire age will be filled with times of difficulty as well.

But Paul explains exactly why this age will be filled with times of difficulty in verses 2-5. There he describes the depraved conditions that will characterize people. And you can see that this vice

list is lengthy. There are just under twenty things that he says that will characterize people in this age.

Now, I'm not going to walk through all of these in detail, especially since most of them are characteristics we can easily understand. But I do want to read them for us. And as I do, I want us to recognize that these were written describing people who lived in the first century world as well as today. Paul can speak of people loving themselves, loving money, being proud and arrogant, being abusive, disobedient to parents [which entails that they don't respect authority], ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. And there's one more, but I want to come back to it in a second.

Just taking that list, you could think Paul is scrolling through social media in our day. You could think he's watching videos of kids mob a convenient store, a man push another in front of an oncoming train in the subway, another get caught for embezzling, or still another boasting about all of his sexual exploits. I mean, doesn't this describe our culture? All of these things show up with just a brief look at people's lives in social media. Yet Paul wants us to know that our generation is no exception. The reason he can be confident of this is because of the nature of mankind outside of Christ. Paul will tell us in Ephesians 2:1-3 that all of mankind is dead in their sins, following the course of this world and the devil himself, living in the passions of their flesh and carrying out the desires of their bodies, being children of wrath. With that description, it should not be surprising for Paul to remind Timothy (and us) that this is what will characterize the unbelieving world around us at any point in history. Paul could say it then, we could say it now, and, if the Lord tarries, someone could say it 500 years from now.

But there is one note at the end that may catch us by surprise. Paul writes, "Having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power" (v. 5). Now, that one doesn't seem to fit, does it? I mean, when we're picturing people abusing others, being brutal and heartless, and arrogant, you're not necessarily picturing someone who is giving the appearance of godliness, are you? But this is what's so tricky. Paul is showing us that though people can be characterized by all of these things—that will reveal themselves internally and behind closed doors—they may well give the appearance of being a godly person externally. They can be like the Pharisees in this way who were like a cup that was clean on the outside but filthy inside.

But, no matter how externally godly they appear, because they don't believe and, therefore, don't have the Spirit, they lack the power to live godly lives. And if you could peer into the details of their lives, you'd find at least some of these realities that he's given in verses 2-4.

We've seen this, haven't we? We've seen the popular preacher on television who won't mention sin or the need for repentance, who seems kind and gives some kind of appearance of godliness, but it's easy to doubt if he knows the Lord. One of the most service-oriented people I know is an atheist who'll happily preach to you about the need to care for your neighbor, but he doesn't have the Spirit and is under the dominion of sin. You might say there are some external signs of

godliness, but inside there is great wickedness that certainly shows itself at various times and various ways.

But Paul's point is that when every age is filled with people who don't know the Lord and are therefore enslaved to their sins, we don't need to anticipate peace and ease as believers. We need to recognize that there will be times of difficulty. People who do not know the Lord and are under the grip of our enemy will happily make life difficult for those who know and seek to obey Jesus.

So, we need to note a couple of things. First, don't let your knees buckle when you face opposition for following Jesus. It doesn't mean something is wrong. It shouldn't be surprising. You should just say, "This is what the Scripture warned us about. These are those times of difficulty." That's perhaps the key lesson Paul wants Timothy to understand. Don't get your hopes up that consistent rosy times are around the corner. Prepare your heart and spine for opposition and difficulty as you seek to obey the Lord.

And a second application of this truth is that we need to keep preaching the gospel. Man's problem isn't simply needing to be convinced to try harder or be better. Also, look at that list again in verses 2-5 and ask yourself if you think that the church's greatest need is to cater to the world's desires in hopes that we might win them over to our side? Of course not. They're under the power of the evil one, dead in their sins, following the passions of their flesh. Their only hope is to hear the gospel, repent, and believe. So, stand strong and keep preaching the gospel, not being surprised when difficult times come.

But it's one thing if all those described in verses 2-5 are out there and content to let us be. But that's not the case. Therefore, Paul shows us in verses 5b-7 that we must avoid false teachers, recognizing their methods.

We must avoid false teachers, recognizing their methods

After Paul gives the long list of vices that characterize unbelievers, he concludes with the exhortation, "Avoid such people" (v. 5b). Timothy needs to have anything to do with them. But then Paul tells him why, writing, "For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth" (vv. 6-7).

The reason Paul wants Timothy (and the congregation) to avoid these false teachers and not give them any hearing is because these men are on the offensive and utilize clever methods. They're not just content to teach falsehood to someone who wants to come seek them out. They're trying to worm their way into homes and particularly lead weak women astray.

Now, why does Paul only mention "weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions" as those targeted? Is it that this is how Paul thinks of all women, and he doesn't see them as capable of being strong, solid, stable, and mature believers? Of course not. There are

many places in his letters we could point to in order to debunk that, but we need look no further than the opening of this letter where he mentioned Timothy's mother and grandmother as being pictures of those with sincere faith. So why then is Paul mentioning weak women here?

Here's my guess. Do you remember back in 1 Timothy 2 Paul had said that he did not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man? His reasons were because there was an order that God had established in creation. He created the man, Adam, and then he created the woman, Eve, to be his helper. That was God's established order. And when Satan came to Eve in the garden, his aim was to reverse that order. He didn't approach Adam as if to say, "I recognize that you're the head of your home, and I was to respect that by coming to you." He sought out Eve to deceive her because he wanted to overturn the created order. Even using a creature, the serpent, to challenge Eve reflected his desire to overturn God's created order as both the man and the women were to exercise dominion over the animals.

Anyway, it may have been that Paul mentioned this because one particular element of the false teaching that was being promoted in Ephesus was that women didn't need to submit to this reality. They didn't need to recognize God's order in the church and home. Therefore, amidst all the other elements of false teaching (and we know from 1 Timothy there were other elements of false teaching going around) these false teachers may have seen women as particular targets, seeking to weasel their way into the homes of these ladies and convince them to step out and live in a way contrary to God's design.

But what makes matters worse, is they were targeting the most vulnerable of women because Paul mentions that these women were "burdened with sins," "led astray by various passions," and "always learning and never able to arrive at the knowledge of the truth." In other words, these men were able to identify the kind of women who liked to listen to teaching that challenged what they'd been taught in the Scripture and the kind of women who were prone to certain sinful desires. And this kind of clever targeting of the most vulnerable shouldn't be surprising to us because our enemy is no fool. We're taught that the unbelieving world is under his sway in Ephesians 2, and he knows how to utilize his subjects target people, appealing to their sinful impulses.

But Paul is right here making sure that Timothy knows the enemy's ways as well. That's why Timothy needs to avoid these men and cut them off. He needs to keep these false teachers away from the church. He needs to make sure the congregation avoids them. He's charged to protect the church, and these men are targeting the most vulnerable in his congregation.

We know that Satan sometimes employs those in sin to come against the church in the form of persecution. We've seen that throughout the church's history, and Paul will mention this in the text we'll look at in a few weeks. But another way the enemy seeks to bring down the church is by utilizing men who'll come along with false teaching and seek to lead vulnerable believers astray. And so we must be on guard and have nothing to do with them. But we make ourselves more vulnerable if we're not joyfully submitted to God's Word in its whole. If you feel yourself uncomfortable with the clear teaching of God's Word, your move must not be to go out and

entertain teaching contrary to it. Rather, stay in God's Word, ask the Lord to align your heart to joyfully accept what it says, and seek out mature believers and your pastors to help you hold fast to God's Word. After all, our enemy is clever and on the offensive. False teachers are under his sway and seeking to capture us in our vulnerabilities. Again, this is why Timothy must avoid them.

But this does raise a question. If this age in which we live will be filled with times of difficulty and depraved men and false teachers will come after those vulnerable in our churches, what are the chances that we'll make it as a church? Should we be hopeful or pessimistic about the church's future? Paul answers in verses 8-9, showing us that we must rest in the fact that Christ's church will prevail.

We must rest in the fact that Christ's church will prevail

Paul ends this section comparing these false teachers (and those in this entire age) with two men who opposed Moses, Jannes and Jambres. He writes in verse 8, "Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith." So, the false teachers are like Jannes and Jambres who opposed Moses and the truth Moses proclaimed in his day. We can follow that, can't we? But my guess is that we might be asking, "But who in the world are Jannes and Jambres?" If you search through your Bible for these names, you'll see that this is the only time they're mentioned. So who are they?

Well, there are other writings, outside of Scripture, that mention these two men as magicians before Pharaoh in Egypt. In other words, this is a reference to the magicians during the Exodus who tried to match the signs that Moses and Aaron performed before Pharaoh. These are the magicians who tried to replicate the plagues that the Lord brought upon Egypt in an attempt to suggest God was not more powerful than them. But if you remember that story, the Lord showed Moses and Aaron (and the God and truth he represented) to be superior to them. Aaron's staff became a serpent, and the magicians also turned staffs into serpents. But then Aaron's staff/serpent ate theirs. And, though they succeeded in creating a few things like the plagues, they ultimately failed and had to acknowledge, "This is the finger of God" (Exod 8:19).

But Paul refers to these men not just to say that there'll always be those who oppose the truth. He's referring to them to say, just as the magicians' folly was revealed, so will these men be. He writes in verse 9, "But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men."

It's true that throughout history men have risen teaching false things, and they have sadly led many astray. In my youth that was represented with two tele-evangelists named Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Baker. They were posing as Bible teachers, and many well-intending believers were giving them money. But they were charlatans. They may have had the appearance of godliness, but behind closed doors they were hiring prostitutes and committing crimes to get rich. But eventually each was exposed. It took a while, and they did much damage to many along the way. But ultimately their folly was exposed, to use Paul's language here.

What Paul wants us to see with this declaration is that the Lord will protect his church. In the very text where Jesus says that this age will be filled with all kinds of difficulty—as Paul reaffirms here—he notes that the gospel will be preached to the nations. The Lord will be glorified in his church in every generation. It’s a promise. So, Paul doesn’t bring up the reality of our days being filled with difficulty and false teachers seeking to destroy us in order that we might tremble and feel paralyzed. He wants us to rest in God’s power, but resting doesn’t mean being lax against these threats. We must stand strong in the truth and work hard to avoid giving ear to anything that challenges God’s Word.

And, gloriously, we’re not alone in this. The Lord has given us each other, indwelt by the Spirit, remembering together that Christ lived, died, and was raised for us so that we might walk forward and stand strong by his grace. So let’s come to the table and give thanks. Amen.