

Living in terrible times

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[0 : 00] 2 Timothy 3 verses 1-9 2 Timothy 3 verses 1-9 2 Timothy 3 verses 1-9

There will be terrible times. I don't need to convince you that this is true, do I? We've all seen far too many terrible times. We're seeing some pretty terrible things right now.

Paul knew such days would come. God knows these days are a reality. He tells us to expect exactly this. We shouldn't be surprised by terrible times because we've been told that they're coming.

When verse 1 talks about the last days, that's a reference to the whole period from Jesus' life on earth up to the day that he comes again in the future when he comes in judgment and ushers in the new heavens and the new earth.

So Timothy was living in the last days that Paul talks about here. We are living in these last days. And maybe to you 2,000 years and counting sounds like a long time to call the last days.

[2 : 17] But that is how the Bible uses the term. And I think why it uses that term is to focus on attention on the fact that Jesus' return could be at any moment. And in the meantime, well, says Paul, life is hard.

And notice the first word of verse 2. People. Why will there be terrible times? Maybe you and I, maybe we're inclined to think first of terrible times in terms of volcanoes and earthquakes and tsunamis and viruses.

But Paul says that's not the biggest problem. What's the bigger problem? It's people. It's people who make life difficult for one another.

It's people who cause the most terrible of times. And if we cast our minds back over the pages of history, it's not hard to see the truth of that, is it? Thus far, well, the coronavirus has killed somewhere around 400,000 people worldwide.

That's terrible. That is tragic. And we should absolutely do what we can to minimise the impact of the virus. But folks, let's keep that in perspective.

[3 : 25] Estimates vary massively. But the most conservative estimate of the number of deaths attributable to Joseph Stalin The most conservative estimate stands around 3.3 million.

World War II? At least 70 million. That's about 3% of the population at the time. Pol Pot. Idi Ami. We could go on and on and on.

The depth of the inhumanity that exists in the world is hard for us to wrap our heads around, isn't it? Terrible times happen because of people. Now, not everyone is like that, of course.

And even for those whose hearts do turn in these terrible directions, not everyone is in a position to cause quite such far-reaching damage. But the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.

The Bible is very realistic about this. So, looking at these verses, 2 Timothy 3, verses 1 to 9, here we see three different groups of people, and each of them has something to teach us about living in terrible times.

[4 : 30] We see this disreputable, unpleasant group in verses 2 through 5, and they're back again in verses 8 and 9, and they teach us to watch what we love.

Then, at the end of verse 5, there's some brief advice to Timothy. From Timothy, we learn to flee from unhealthy entanglements. And then, verses 6 and 7, we meet a group of women there.

And the takeaway from these women? Learn the truth. So, three pieces of advice, three instructions for us this morning. Watch what you love. Flee unhealthy entanglements and learn the truth.

Okay. Watch what you love. Come back up to verse 2 with me. The problem of the terrible times in the last days, this comes because of people, specifically people who will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash,

conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power.

It's a pretty grim portrait, isn't it? We'll come on to verse 5 in a minute, but first consider that list there on the screen in verses 2 through 4. You notice how it's bookended by love.

[5 : 51] It begins, people will be lovers of themselves, and it ends with the indictment that they will be lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. Lovers of themselves as opposed to love of neighbour, the opposite of the hospitality that in his first letter, Paul said the elders were to exhibit.

Hospitality there, that could be translated love of strangers. See, those who follow in Jesus' ways are not lovers of themselves. Rather, they show love to their neighbour, as we'll consider next week when we look at the parable of the Good Samaritan, and they show love to strangers.

The people here in 2 Timothy 3 verse 2, these people are focused on themselves, like a hedgehog, huddled together, hugging the soft warmth into itself and presenting only the barbs and prickles to the outside world.

We don't have to work our way through the whole of this list to see how this flows from a misdirected love. When all you love is yourself, well, of course, your love of money is going to cause you to start taking advantage of the civil unrest and to start looting homes and businesses. And when your love of yourself causes you to be proud and abusive and arrogant, of course, you'll consider others less than yourself. Of course, you'll ignore their cries for help, even as you inflict the harm yourself.

[7 : 18] When there is a developed attitude of unforgiveness, of course, you're going to count double the minor infractions of others and excuse your own much greater sins. When you're brutal and lack self-control, many others will suffer.

Reinhold Niebuhr, he said, the doctrine of human sinfulness is the most empirical of all Christian doctrines. It is readily apparent to us that the human heart is depraved, that human beings are sinful.

You only have to turn on the TV, don't you, to see the reality of human depravity. You only have to open a newspaper or open a history book to see the reality that there are and will be terrible times because people are lovers of themselves.

We look out and we see this reality. But there's a danger, isn't there? There's a danger that we look at this list and we point it only outwards. And maybe that's especially a danger because some of the examples I've used thus far have been on the more extreme end of these things, haven't they? But Paul wouldn't need to paint such a detailed picture if all that he wanted to convey was have nothing to do with such people. Verse 5. Philip Towner, he helpfully points out in his commentary that rather than taking this passage safely as a portrait of them in distinction from us.

[8 : 47] This passage is capable of functioning as a mirror that's ready to reflect unsettling and painful tendencies in our own character. The mirror reveals in order to bring healing and growth, but the one gazing into it must own the reflection for this to happen.

Folks, if this passage doesn't prompt us to consider our own inclination towards boastfulness and pride and brutality and conceit, if it doesn't cause us to consider our own lives, then we are blinding ourselves to reality.

See, when Paul writes a similar list of vices in Romans chapter 1, he's on his way there to the conclusion in chapter 3 of that letter, the conclusion there is no one righteous, not even one.

This list doesn't make us look and think, look at them out there. This list should make us look within and see there is no one righteous. Surely we can see, can't we, that all too often we are lovers of ourselves, not of our neighbours.

And I suggest to you that the end of this list shows us the even more underlying cause. Why is it that we love ourselves rather than others? Isn't it because we are not lovers of God?

[10 : 09] See, human beings are designed to love God. And we're designed for our love of one another to flow out from that. That the parable of the unforgiving servant that you can go and read in Matthew 18, that parable reminds us that knowing we're loved by God, knowing we're forgiven by God, that that should overflow out into us being loving and forgiving towards others.

Matthew 22, Jesus is asked, which is the greatest commandment? And he replies, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.

And the second is like it. Love your neighbour as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. Everything else flows out from this beginning.

Love God, love your neighbour as yourself. So from the portrait of these wicked people, we have ourselves a serious reminder. Watch what you love.

There's a final further warning from these wicked people as well. Verse five, they have a form of godliness but deny its power. That there, that's form in the sense of appearance, not form as in kind of a variety of.

[11:25] Paul's saying, maybe they look godly for a minute from the outside but it's all a sham. It's just an appearance of godliness, not a reality. And again, again it would be quite easy for us to point the finger out.

Point and stand and denounce those who find a veneer of religion to be convenient but show little evidence that they have read the book that they brandish. Maybe we should be grateful that in the UK there seems to be little political capital to be gained from this kind of outward display of piety. Whatever his faults, at least dear Boris doesn't seem to even pretend a Christian faith. But folks, again, let's hold up the mirror because many of us have this same risk of having a mere semblance of godliness.

Aren't we tempted, tempted to make religion about what we do rather than about who we know? I'll be right with God because I've been going to church every week since I was born. God will be pleased with me because I'm a good person.

He's not really a Christian. He doesn't even come to the prayer meeting. Not even now when it's so easy. You don't even have to get off the sofa. Come on! Of course I'm a Christian. I was baptized, wasn't I?

[12:38] Of course I'm a Christian. I read my Bible every day. But see, for us, just as for these people in Timothy's day, there is the very real possibility that what we have is the form of godliness and we deny its power.

How do we get past that veneer? How do we access that power? Well, that means we're looking for a situation where the outward piety, that it flows out from an inner reality.

Real power comes from knowing the God who saves and who calls according to the purpose and grace manifested by Jesus Christ who abolished death and gave life and immortality. That's what Paul pointed out back in verse 10 of the first chapter.

Real power comes from the Holy Spirit at work within us. Real power comes from, unlike the women we'll consider in a couple of minutes, real power comes from a knowledge of the truth. So folks, these false teachers in Ephesus 2,000 years ago, they remind you and me today. They remind us to watch out for what we love. To love God, not pleasure.

[13:47] To love others, not ourselves. To find the power of true godliness, not just love the external trappings of religion. Okay, secondly, let's move from those false teachers to consider Timothy.

Paul's instructions to Timothy, verse 5, have nothing to do with such people. Don't be sucked in by their attitudes. Don't be tempted to join them in their arrogance.

They only love themselves. If they're flattering you, it's because they think they stand to gain something by it. Don't be dragged in. They love pleasure, not God.

So don't be inclined to walk down their road. That's Paul's advice to Timothy. Now, naturally, this does not mean for Timothy, or for that matter for us, it does not mean to avoid all contact with sinners.

Quite apart from the fact that of avoiding all contact with sinners, that would mean never speaking to anybody at all. Quite apart from that, we note that Jesus himself was the friend of tax collectors and sinners.

[14:53] And we note that a strict separation would be at odds with the instruction just a couple of verses earlier. At the end of chapter 2, Timothy's encouraged to gently instruct his opponents, seeking their repentance and knowledge of the truth.

You can't do that if you never have any kind of contact with them. So I think the point is rather more a sense of refusing to be caught up in their teachings, of avoiding being tangled in the web of these false teachers, and perhaps most importantly, being clear that despite a veneer of godliness, that their arrogance, their self-love, and their false teachings, that these are not to be confused with true Christianity.

Christianity. One of the reasons why formal excommunication, kind of placing somebody who was once a member of a church outside of the church, one of the reasons why that sometimes is the right course is because it says officially, this person does not speak for us.

This person is not representative of Christianity. See, church membership, church membership means we say of one another, we share a faith. We agree to the same gospel.

We follow the same saviour. Timothy is supposed to have nothing to do with these false teachers, lest people think that they represent him, or worse, think that they represent the Jesus whom he proclaims.

[16:21] See, for Timothy, part of guarding the treasure of the gospel is to say, that is not it. That is not the gospel. Sometimes that means saying this person does not represent the gospel.

And there are times when we need to say such things as individuals, and there are times when we have to say it as a church. And maybe in light of recent events, perhaps it is appropriate for me to say publicly, anyone who thinks that the life of a human being is less valuable because of the colour of their skin does not believe the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Of course, black lives matter. And it is horrifying that it needs to be said. And by the way, do you know why black lives matter?

Because they are made in the image of God. Not everyone who claims to be a Christian knows the power of the risen Lord Jesus in their lives. A cry for justice is implicit in the gospel.

And those of us who claim to believe and to follow that gospel should be at work to see just injustice called out and appropriately punished. We should be seeking to eliminate that injustice in our own lives.

[17:35] And we should be working with others to make our societies more just as well. So, watch what you love, flee unhealthy entanglements, and turning to the women in verses 6 and 7, thirdly, learn the truth.

Verse 6 says that one of the characteristics of these false teachers who so embody the vices of the first few verses, one of their characteristics is that they worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women.

Okay, first up, don't mishear this. Paul does not say all women are gullible. He says the women that these false teachers target, or at least the ones where they find success, he says they are gullible women.

Some women are gullible. Are these false teachers disproportionately targeting women? It seems so. But Paul's not saying here that women are inferior.

He's not saying women don't have the sense to know better. No, he's saying these women should come to a knowledge of the truth. He's saying these particular women are gullible.

[18:45] And it's a fact of history that women would have been at home during the day far more than the men of Ephesus would. And perhaps that the lowly position of women in the society of the time gave these false teachers leverage over them.

But that position isn't the focus here, is it? Why are these women susceptible to the false teachers? Well, because they're laden down with sins and swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.

See, these women are all too conscious of their past sins. They know they've fallen short of God's standards in the past. They feel the burden of that. They're laden down.

Don't they overread the evil desires there in verse 6? It's not so much that they actively want to do evil as kind of that they're easily swayed, that they're swung about by a variety of teachings.

This is what Paul in Ephesians 4.14 calls out being tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

[19:54] That was happening in Ephesus when he wrote that letter and it's still happening when he writes this letter. These people are easily swayed. Why? Verse 7, they're always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.

G.K. Chesterton, he said, merely having an open mind is nothing. The object, the purpose of opening the mind as of opening the mouth is to shut it again on something solid.

See, the solution for these women and the solution for any of us today who are in danger of following in their footsteps, the solution is to know the truth. Come to a knowledge of the truth.

Now, if that sounds arrogant, to talk about knowing the truth, well, remember what we said a fortnight ago. God's blessing is found in trusting his revelation. Knowing the truth is not a statement about me or about you if you say that you know the truth. Knowing the truth is not here arrogance and pride, but rather it's the humility to say, I need the one who knows to tell me the truth.

[21 : 07] I can't figure out God for myself. I need him to show himself to me. See, there's plenty of theories filling the shelves of the bookshops and the warehouses at Amazon.

There's plenty of religious ideas being broadcast on the airwaves. There's plenty of things that you might listen to with a sincere desire to know the truth.

But sadly, many of those things, though you will be ever learning, will never cause you to arrive at the truth. What's the solution for these women?

Know the truth. Remember, a big part of their problem, a big part of their difficulty, is that they feel laden down by their sins. They feel like they can't shake off their past.

And maybe these false teachers, maybe they're contriving to subtly remind these women of the past. Maybe they're pretending to offer hope that somehow never quite comes to fruition.

[22 : 09] Kind of like the scam preacher, who, when you protest that the promised blessing never arrives, somehow he convinces you that another hundred dollars will do the trick where the first fifty didn't.

What's the answer? Know the truth. Know the truth of the one and only way that the guilt of those sins, that they are so conscious of, the one and only way that that guilt can be washed away.

The only way that the slate can be wiped clean. How can you cease to be laden down with sin?

Bring it to the cross. As the hymn proclaims, foul I to the fountain fly, wash me saviour or I die.

One solution. But what a solution it is. What a guarantee. That however foul you may be, however heavily laden with sin, that when you are washed by the saviour, you are washed indeed.

That's the truth these poor women needed to know. That's the truth I need to know. And it's the truth you need to know. May God grant you a clear and settled knowledge of this precious truth.

[23 : 32] Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord God Almighty, we thank you for revealing truth in the pages of your word.

We thank you that it not only tells us who you are, but also paints a picture of humanity. As we read of the depths of depravity in these verses, as we see that depravity displayed on our TV screens and in our history books, Lord God, we cry out we cry out to you.

We cry out for justice. We thank you that at the end of history justice will be done, our wrongs will be righted, and we long for that to break through here and now.

Because we love you, because we love all those whom you have created in your image, we cry out in solidarity with those who find themselves denied justice, denied even the most basic right to life itself.

And whilst we condemn the excesses of some who take advantage of a time of unrest to advantage themselves, yet we recognise the frustration of those too long denied justice by the processes that should have provided it, and too long living in fear of those who should be their protectors.

[24 : 54] Lord Jesus, we pray for a transformation of unjust structures in our world, but more than that we pray for true transformation, for inner transformation, we pray for a turning to you.

We pray for that heart transformation that comes from a knowledge of the truth. We pray that you would continue the work of transforming our hearts to reflect your priorities.

We pray that you would breathe life into the dead hearts of those who do not know you. We pray that the church of today will more closely mirror John's vision of your throne room, where people from every nation, tribe, people, and language stand before your throne proclaiming praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and power and strength to you our God forever and ever.

Amen.