

Stay Focussed amidst Disaster

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[0 : 00] Now, I have a high regard for people who are able to stay focused in the midst of a crisis. Perhaps it's a medical emergency in the trauma department or something, or it's an earthquake with the first responders.

But these people are not distracted by the surrounding chaos. They're not overcome by fear, but they remain calm to deal with the threats and to do the work they've been asked to do.

A few weeks ago, I was watching a documentary on SBS, and some of you may remember the sinking of the luxury liner, the Costa Concordia.

Remember that? That's a picture of that on the screen. It happened exactly 10 years ago off the coast of Italy. And so throughout the program, they were interviewing various people.

And of course, the program highlighted the actions of the captain, Francesco Schettino. He's that debonair guy on the left there. And, you know, there were a lot of things said about him, but some of the things that were said was that he was indecisive, that actually he had a lady companion on the bridge the night that this whole event took place.

[1 : 08] But some of the more grievous things that he did was to wait too long before evacuating the passengers on the lifeboat. And the worst thing of all was that he was one of the first to jump ship on the lifeboat, which as a captain is just a no-no, right?

Now, on the other hand, there's the other guy on the right there. His name is Manrico Giampadroni. I love that name. He's the hotel director, sort of the maitre d' kind of thing of the whole cruise.

But he stayed on board to help the passengers onto the lifeboat. He stayed focused on his job despite all the chaos around him, so much so that he ended up being trapped on board.

And he actually had to wait 36 hours before divers could come and find him. They found him actually in an air pocket with sort of his head just above water.

His feet, I think, were stuck in some furniture and he couldn't get himself out of that. And so we see on the one hand the captain who, you know, you'd think was trained for all these, for such emergencies, only to think of his own life when in danger.

[2 : 21] And then on the other, the director, the hotel director, who risked his life but stayed focused on the task, which really demands a lot of courage and determination, doesn't it?

And focus. Certainly not easy when there's panic all around you and everyone is fighting for their life and you yourself risk losing yours. Well, in our passage today, Paul likewise encourages us to stay focused in a time of crisis.

But the crisis that he has in mind is a moral and spiritual one. For he begins with this shocking statement in verse 1. So on the screen he says, But mark this, there will be terrible times in the last days.

Now in case you're wondering, we're in the last days? And certainly, if you ask, you know, the average person on the street, they might indeed think that it is, we are in terrible times.

They might mention the pandemic or climate change or, you know, tensions with Taiwan or, you know, now rumors of war on, you know, potential war in the Ukraine.

[3 : 35] Now none of these are trivial. But Paul is speaking here of a more profound crisis. It's not like he didn't have his own share of natural disasters and political crisis in his day.

But times were not terrible for him because of them. Instead, Paul mentions these things. He says, People 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. Have nothing to do with such people. In other words, the things that mark times as terrible are the result of human depravity.

Now this is a long list, isn't it? But I think the thing that ties this whole list together is summed up in that very first label. People do these things because they are lovers of themselves, rather than lovers of God, which bookends the other end of the list.

So it's selfishness. It's narcissism. The exact opposite of loving God. Now you see, we are all created to love and worship, aren't we?

[5 : 00] And so we don't end up loving God. We find something to take his place. And whatever we end up worshipping, the underlying motive, I believe, is still love of self.

Which, according to the list, can show up in any number of ways, right? So love of money, which is greed, is really selfishness, isn't it? Underlying it, because it's money for ourselves.

Or pride, or arrogance. Even disobedience to parents, I think, is the love of self-autonomy. That you want to have your own say and control of your life.

And you don't want somebody else telling you what to do. And so sooner or later, our actions and lives reveal what we love. We can't hide or run away from it. And so I suppose the challenge to us is, do we dare look critically at our own lives to see what it says about our true love?

We know that for Victor, for a time, it was cryptocurrency. But I'm sure, you know, he's repented of it, so praise God for that. But what about you?

[6 : 08] What do your actions and your preoccupations show? Does it show or reflect a love for God? Or more, a love for self? Now, it's natural when we look at this list to stereotype the types of people we think is being described here.

And so we may think, oh, you know, Paul must be referring to the criminals, you know, the petty thieves. Or if you tend to stick up for the little people, you might think, oh, no, these are the greedy captains of industry, the bosses that exploit the poor.

But actually, just in the way Paul ends the list, I think he has other people in mind. For he says of them that they have a form of godliness.

In other words, there's a level of hypocrisy here. Outwardly, these people appear godly. And righteous. There may be even people that we look up to in society.

Influential, influencers, maybe even on social media. Where, you know, they'll get on TV and, you know, their opinions are sought after. As to what's right and what's wrong. Maybe they champion a particular cause or charity.

[7 : 14] It all seems rather godly on the outside. But it's actually of no use. Because, Paul says, it does nothing for them in terms of salvation or sanctification.

And I think Paul goes even so far as to imply that these people might even be among us in church. In verse 6, he says, There are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women.

And it's not just women, but men are gullible as well. It's just that women tend to be at that time the ones at home. So they could entertain or invite people in. But they're loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires.

Always learning, but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. Now, in my mind, I imagine these people like, a bit like door-to-door salesmen, maybe.

Or door-to-door preachers. Or the equivalent of, you know, they're probably organizing the ancient equivalent of Tupperware parties. Except they're not selling plastic. But what they're selling is the secret to happiness in life.

[8 : 25] They purport to offer the truth. And, you know, we as a church, that's what we value too, isn't it? We teach. We purport to teach the truth. And I'm praying and hoping that we do.

And I'm confident that we do if we stick to God's word. But we spend a lot of time, don't we, talking about the truth. And so do these people. And sadly, Paul says that although they're coming across sincere, almost always learning, but they're never coming to a real knowledge of the truth.

Now, I think sometimes, nowadays, if you look online, there's quite a lot of examples and testimonies of people like that. So-called Christian writers or pastors, I think.

And, you know, they boast that they've moved on from their faith. They write about it. They talk about how they've been on an authentic journey of discovery. And they've now become wiser so as to reject the faith of their youth.

They wear the badge of ex-evangelicals with pride. Some of you will know what I'm talking about.

And then they speak about, you know, discovering new ways of reading the Bible or reinterpreting it with fresh insights.

[9 : 38] But ultimately, all they're doing is undermining the gospel and godly living. You know, often it's, you know, it's like, it's funny how they do this, but I've come to the insight of this, insights into this, you know, and the result of which is I've been told to leave my wife of 20 years or something.

It always seems to go hand in hand with excusing some sort of behavior that the Bible frowns on. Paul says, don't be fooled.

These are not people who are simply naive or ignorant. They're doing it intentionally. This is willful sin. And Paul brings to mind two Old Testament figures in verse 8.

He says, just as Janus and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these teachers, notice Paul says that teachers or people who try to teach, oppose the truth. They are men of depraved minds who are, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected.

But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone. Now, these two names, if you look in the Old Testament, are not there. But Jewish tradition identifies them as Pharaoh's magicians.

[10 : 49] So, remember Moses came and confronted Pharaoh in Exodus, confronted Pharaoh in Exodus. And so, as Moses was trying to, you know, he performed his signs in front of Pharaoh, these magicians, if you recall, tried to mimic Moses, didn't they?

And opposed him in that way. Now, we all know that in Exodus, Pharaoh is the personification of evil. And so, these magicians are agents of evil as well.

Which is exactly how Paul sees these people in his time. Like the magicians, they too try and mimic the truth, don't they? When actually, in fact, what they're doing is the opposite.

Selling lies. And as I said before, this is not just a simple, honest mistake. You know, some of us can't read the Bible wrongly from time to time. No, they stand from a depraved mind, seeking to destroy others, to deceive them, to load them with sins.

Why are they doing this? What's their motivation? Well, if we go back to the first few verses, it's because they are lovers of themselves, aren't they? The one follows from the other. They're seeking their own fame or to get rich or to have power or influence.

[12 : 06] That's why it leads them to that sort of depraved behavior. And so, when we read this, the picture that Paul paints is of a moral landscape that is in dire straits in the last days.

It's in terrible times. And we're living through it, whether we see it or not. Now, if this has caught you by surprise, and you are surprised, then I think, good, Paul has had his intended consequence or intended this to happen.

If, however, you're feeling a bit depressed, well, Paul now goes on to say that even though we may feel helpless, let's not feel hopeless.

Because things are very much as God intended. This is very much under God's sovereign hand. And, in fact, if you go all the way back to Daniel, which is what Will read, we've seen, haven't we, predictions and warnings that this will occur.

And so, Paul is simply repeating what is already in the Old Testament. And so, now to the rest of the chapter, Paul offers Timothy encouragement and comfort. He's saying that even though the wrong may seem to be getting the upper hand at the moment, they won't get very far because God will not allow them to.

[13 : 26] Their empty godliness or rather godlessness and folly will become clear. So, don't be discouraged. Don't be distracted by them and by these terrible times.

Instead, focus on doing what's right. And so, Paul turns his attention to how Timothy and Christians like him, that's us, ought to live.

First, Paul reminds him of his own life, which is marked by suffering and persecution. This, he writes, reminds Timothy, is what all who lead a godly life should expect.

So, in the next verse, you, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecution, sufferings. What kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra?

The persecutions I endured. Yet, the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

[14 : 32] While evildoers and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. Now, I think sometimes as a church, we're not very good, are we, at telling new or young Christians that the godly life is going to be hard.

Perhaps, you know, we just, I don't know, the nuance of saying on the one hand that you are blessed by God and you have eternal life. And then, at the very same time saying, but that life will come with suffering.

We're sort of maybe not comfortable saying it like that. Or perhaps, it's because we've fallen under the spell of the age, of this age, where, you know, I think we now value safety and physical comfort and pain-free as number one priorities in our life, don't we?

Just the whole pandemic has just brought it out. Safety is the number one thing. I'm not saying we shouldn't be safe. But there's a difference in being cautious and doing what's prudent and making safety our God, isn't it?

So, I want to ask to let this verse just sink in. And perhaps even memorize it and take it to heart.

Paul says, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

[15:52] And friends, notice, it's not may be persecuted. It's will be persecuted. Now, we can talk about the exact forms of what that persecution may be, but there's no running away from this verse or promise.

Actually, do you take this as a promise? This is a promise, isn't it? Promise in the Bible. Do you embrace this promise? Because if you desire to follow Christ, then don't seek or expect the adulation of the world.

Christ didn't. Don't expect to get ahead in this life. Christ didn't. Don't expect to be spared from hardship, especially for obeying God and doing His will.

Because even Christ wasn't. Are we willing? You know, how does that sit with us? Are we willing to accept this joyfully? Even as we see evildoers and impostors around us getting away with it.

They're going to get from bad to worse, Paul says. But are we going to get caught up in it? Because they're so bad that even as they deceive, they end up deceiving themselves.

[17:06] They've lost sight of the fact that they're deceiving and they are themselves being deceived. You know, the godly life in Christ Jesus will be hard. But I want to thank, I think we ought to thank God for actually warning us.

Because when we have realistic expectations of the Christian life, then it prepares us for it, doesn't it? Imagine if you're a cancer sufferer and you go for treatment and your doctor tells you, you know what, don't worry about the chemotherapy.

No big deal. You know, you'll get through it. Not breeze, you know. It'll be nothing. Would you want to hear that? Or would you rather them say to you, no, no, this is going to be hard.

There'll be side effects. You'll get nausea. You'll get all sorts of other things. But you know, just stick in there and you can get through it. Well, this is what God is doing, isn't it? He's giving us realistic expectations of the godly life.

So that when we do get persecuted and it will come, even though I don't know what shape or form it might happen in your life, then we can go, ah, God has already prepared me for this and he will help me through it.

[18:12] I'm prepared. I'm ready for this. And Paul says that, you know, God did not just warn them. He also gives us his comfort, doesn't it? Because Paul says that even though he was not spared hardship, yet God rescued him from it all.

And to me, that's the best kind of comfort and safety, isn't it? Not that we'll be spared hardship, but rather that God will be there to rescue us from all of them and to bring us safely into his eternal kingdom.

So brothers and sisters, I hope that, you know, you don't take this as a discouragement, but actually an encouragement that God is preparing you to endure to the very end.

But in the meantime, Paul brings us back to what we're to focus on. And it's the same as last week, if you're here. We are to keep our eyes on God's word and good work that arises from him.

And both of them go hand in hand as we will now see in the last four verses. So verse 14, Now Timothy, like some of us, grew up in a godly home.

[19:33] His mother and grandmother had a genuine faith and taught him the scriptures, which at the time was the Old Testament. And that was such a valuable thing that they did. Because whether you're a Christian from young or as an adult, it's the holy scriptures that make you wise for salvation.

And it's not just that it gives you the head knowledge, but rather that that knowledge produces faith in Jesus. It's the means of salvation, without which you will not come to know Christ.

And so as the world around us gets more and more evil, the way to survive and thrive is to know the Bible, to know God's word. And so we make no apologies, and many of you have come to this church for this reason.

We make no apologies for prioritizing the study of God's word here. Not just to increase your head knowledge, but to fan the flame of faith so that you will be wise for salvation.

We need God's word, don't we, to grow in faith. Wisdom from God comes from his word. And particularly when evildoers and imposters abound, we need to know the scriptures so that we know when they are lying and when they are giving us falsehood.

[20 : 49] So I don't want to labor over this because I know many of you are doing this already, but if you've not joined a growth group for this year, or you haven't in the past, prioritized coming to one, then why don't you make it a point to do so this year?

Now, I know with COVID, who knows what's going to happen, whether we get back on Zoom and we still have to come and have our Bible studies in masks or whatnot. But regardless of all that, I mean, that's minor hardship, isn't it, compared to persecution?

Let that not distract us from continuing to study God's word together. It may be harder. It may be more tiring. We may have to concentrate a bit more. But no, let's keep trying to get into God's word together this year.

Let's not just do it for 20 minutes or so on Sunday, but do it yourself each and every day of the week and when you get together in small groups. And then in conjunction with knowing your Bible, let's put it into practice.

Apply it. Which is what the famous verse, many of you have probably memorized this, from kids' church or Sunday school. It says in verse 16 and 17, Now I know many of you are, you know, you've memorized this, you know this verse inside out.

[22 : 18] Maybe it's the verse that's, you know, typed in your Bible as your motto or whatever. But I just want to mention a few things just by way of conclusion. Firstly, to say, Scripture not only makes us wise for salvation, but equips us for every good work.

Faith and good works must go hand in hand, as sure many of you realize. And both are nurtured through knowing God's word. But notice how comprehensive it is.

It says, All scripture is God-breathed. For Paul, that was the Old Testament. But for us, that's everything from Genesis chapter 1, verse 1, to Revelation chapter 22, verse 21.

It's not just your favorite verse that you put on your screensaver that's going to equip you. It's the whole counsel of God, isn't it? And, notice, it's useful for teaching, which we like.

But what about rebuking and correcting, which we perhaps don't like? It's useful for both, isn't it?

Both are essential. And unless you're Jesus, I'm pretty sure that Scripture has something to rebuke you over.

[23 : 22] You might just not realize what it is now, at the moment. And our tendency is that whenever we are rebuked from God's word, we tend to, like, ignore it, or reject it, or get upset, isn't it?

But that shouldn't be, isn't it? Because one of the key users of Scripture, Paul says, is to correct us, to train us in righteousness. Otherwise, we will fall into evil.

And then, finally, notice how it's useful for equipping every good work. In fact, it's not just equipping, but thoroughly equipping.

Now, I'm sure many of you know what being thorough is. For example, I've often been told that when I clean the kitchen stove, it's not thoroughly clean.

All right? It is clean. You look at it, it looks clean, but when you run your fingers over it, there's still a film of oil over it, isn't it? Not help, because I use a greasy cloth to wipe the stove.

[24 : 21] But that's the idea of being thoroughly clean, isn't it? To do it really, really well, to be complete in doing the job. And that's what the Bible does for us when it thoroughly equips us for every good work.

So it's not just good work for a church, but good work at home, at school, in your marriage, in everything. And so, you know, for example, this Life at Work conference, come along to that, because part of it is to equip you to do good work from God's Word at your workplace.

Or if you're at uni, be part of a Christian union or a Christian group like that, because that trains you for good work whilst you're at campus. The idea, though, is that the Bible trains us in all aspects of righteousness, isn't it?

It's not like we need the Bible and then we need something else as an add-on, a module, an elective or something. No, the Bible equips us thoroughly for every good work. It's pretty good, isn't it? You hold it in your hands every day and it equips you every day thoroughly for every good work. So, friends, to summarize, these are terrible times that we live in.

[25 : 34] It may not seem so because we live in such a, you know, comfortable city like Melbourne, but actually, under the veneer of this modern and sophisticated city, there is a crisis going on.

And I say this because as long as people love themselves more than they love God, then we are people in crisis. That's what Paul says.

And as the prophecy in Daniel showed, there will be a great dividing at the end of time, isn't it? Between two camps. As it says in verse 2, some will rise to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.

And in verse 10, it says, many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. There is no sitting on the fence, is there? You can't choose to just not be either.

Either we stand firm in the gospel and in the Lord Jesus, which will lead to hard life and suffering and persecution for a time, or we choose to float away with the wicked, be deceived and then start deceiving.

[26 : 43] The only way to avoid that is to anchor ourselves, isn't it? As Paul encouraged Timothy in the Holy Scriptures to know that it makes us wise by faith for salvation and so that it can equip us thoroughly for every good work.

Let's pray. Father, guide us from these terrible times so that we will not be lovers of ourselves but lovers of you, our God, worshipping you wholeheartedly in true obedience and faith.

Father, grow us in the knowledge of your words so that we may be thoroughly equipped for every good work, wise for salvation and able to face the persecution that comes with a godly life.

Strengthen us for such a time as this and bring us safely to eternity. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.