

Living in Difficult Days

2 Timothy 3:1–9

When some Christians hear that there will be a study on the last days, the first question they want answered is, “How close are we to Christ’s return?” “Are we the generation of the rapture?” “Are we on the edge of the tribulation?” And there have always been teachers willing to feed that fixation — coming close to a date, or naming one.

If you had asked Paul two thousand years ago whether he was living in the last days, he would have said yes. Was he wrong? No. The last days began with the coming of Christ. Paul was not guessing a calendar. He understood what the last days are, and what it takes to live faithfully in them.

Some want the timeline because they know things will get harder and they want out of the hardship. Most of us just want to know how to keep going when the pressures of life are weighing us down and wearing us out.

Paul does not offer either group an escape. He says, “But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.”

Last words do not waste time on speculation. Paul is writing from prison. He knows the time of his departure is at hand, and he is speaking to a next-generation leader who must hold the line when the days grow hard. He begins this section with a command: “But understand this.”

Not, “Be entertained by this.” Not, “Be shocked by this.” Not, “Build a chart about this.

Understand this.

Main idea: The church will not hold in difficult days by comfort or by charts, but by seeing the times clearly, turning from what corrupts, and coming to know Christ until love for Him replaces love of self.

This morning, we will consider the essential truths Paul gives Timothy for living in difficult days.

Paul starts by telling Timothy to **Understand the times**.

“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.” 2 Timothy 3:1

In the New Testament the last days are not only a final sliver of history. They are the age between Christ’s first coming and His return. We are in them. Timothy was in them. The question is not whether we live in the last days. The question is whether we understand what that means.

It means the days will be difficult. Not merely busy. Not merely heavy. Difficult. There will be pressure on the church, corruption in the culture, and counterfeit religion that looks alive but is dead.

That is why we still need a theology of suffering. A therapeutic gospel cannot carry a soul through days like these. A therapeutic gospel asks, “How can I feel better?” The gospel Paul preached asks, “Who is Christ, and will I follow Him when it costs?” One medicates the self. The other crucifies it. One makes consumers who leave when the days get hard. The other makes disciples who stay because Jesus is worthy.

Then Paul gives Timothy a character profile of the age. Let’s not rush past the list. It is not a pile of insults. It’s for our discernment.

Kent Hughes is helpful here. He points out that the whole description is held together by an inversion of love. Read the first trait and the last trait together: “lovers of self... rather than lovers of God.” When love for God is replaced by love for self, the rest of the list follows. Love of money. Love of pleasure. No love for what is good. Pride, coldness, slander, and a loss of self-control are not random vices. They are what a heart looks like when it has turned the Great Commandment upside down.

This is not a list of describing a few religious villains. Paul is describing the climate of the last days — what ordinary life starts to look like when self is loved more than God.

Then notice that Paul names the cover that hides all the rest:

“having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.” 2 Timothy 3:5

This is the greatest threat to the health of the church. And not because a religious mask is a greater sin than self-love, but because it conceals it. The other traits are ugly in the open. But this one puts a Christian covering over them. That is how inverted love survives inside the church.

That is what makes these difficult days so dangerous. A form of religion that looks Christian on the outside and has no power on the inside. People can sing, post, quote Scripture, and show up — and still love themselves more than God. They take in content and post about it, but there is no tangible, hands-and-feet evidence that they love God’s people.

Understand the times, or the times will catechize you. The world already calls evil good and good evil. If the church does not know the difference, it will not stay different. And if we are not different, we will not make a difference, and we will not persevere.

The days are difficult, dark, and deceptive. They also disqualify people who will not keep themselves clean from a world that loves self more than God. And they destroy those who set themselves against the truth. Paul is not trying to make Timothy cynical. He is trying to keep him awake.

Now the next truth that rises from this text is this: **Avoid corrupt influence.**

Again speaking of those who have an appearance of godliness, but deny its power Paul says, “Avoid such people.”

That sounds unkind in a culture that treats every boundary as cruelty. It is not cruelty. It's obedience. Paul is not telling Timothy to stop loving sinners. He is telling him not to apprentice himself to people whose religion has no power.

Last week we heard the same heartbeat. Flee youthful passions. Pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome. Now Paul shows why that charge is so urgent.

The climate around Timothy was filled with people who will pull him off mission — who will get him majoring on the minors and arguing over what does not matter, instead of keeping the main thing the main thing.

We are called to witness to the lost. We are not called to keep company that feeds the flesh. There is a difference between reaching people and rooming with corruption. There is a difference between loving a wanderer and letting a counterfeit teacher set up in your living room.

Paul goes to say that they *“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.”* 2 Timothy 3:6-7

Now Paul was not saying that all women are weak. He was naming certain women, and he was naming a strategy. In that day, false teachers slipped into households and preyed on women who were spiritually immature — often lonely, idle, or discontented — loaded with unresolved guilt and unruly desire.

This is a picture of vulnerability: a conscience that has never been cleaned, appetites that still drive the life, and a craving for information that never becomes a transforming knowledge of Jesus.

That door doesn't have a male or female sign on it today. It can be a woman at home. It can be a man on his smartphone at midnight. It

can be a student living on influencers. It can be a Christian who is always learning and never arriving.

If false teachers crept into houses then, how much easier is it now? They do not need a door. They have a screen. Television, social media, and a thousand voices with no church, no elders, and no accountability can sit in your house all day.

Some of them use Christian language. They can quote a verse, talk about Jesus, but still not be safe. A form of godliness can travel farther now than it ever could in Paul's day. It can move through a feed, a podcast, a song, or a polished church service and sound true before anyone has tested it.

Church, avoid such people and places. Avoid the feed that feeds your anger. Avoid the teacher who never stands under authority. Avoid the atmosphere that keeps you stimulated and never sanctified. You cannot pursue a pure heart while you keep making room for what pollutes it.

We must be different if we are going to make a difference. Holiness is not isolation from the mission. Holiness protects the vessels of God.

The final truth that brings it home is: **Arrive at a knowledge of the truth.**

Paul writes in verse 7 of people who are “always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.” He is exposing a particular kind of person in his day — people who keep taking in more and never come to the truth. But he is also showing us where every believer must go.

Last week the text used the same language. Paul explained that the Lord's servant must minister in such a way that God may grant repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth. That is not only a rescue for the deceived. It is the path for all of us. We are not merely collecting information. We are to come to the truth, remain in it, and grow in it.

This is the danger of our information age in a single line. We can learn constantly and never arrive. We can listen to sermons, debates, prophecy updates, and podcasts and still not know the truth in the way Paul means it.

Knowledge of the truth includes sound doctrine. Do not hear me saying doctrine does not matter. It does. Timothy has been told to guard the good deposit. But knowledge of the truth is more than being right about a position or timeline. It is coming to the truth that is in Jesus.

Jesus did not say, "Your system will set you free." He said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32). And then He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." John 14:6

You can be an expert in end-times charts and still not love Jesus. You can win the argument about the rapture and lose the people in front of you. I am not picking a fight over the timing of the Lord's return. I am saying we often miss the forest for the trees. The faithful in Acts did not persevere because they had the perfect scheme of the future. They persevered because they loved Jesus and counted it an honor to suffer for His name. Acts 5:41

That is what it means to arrive at the knowledge of the truth. It is to come to Jesus.

Now Paul then goes on to show what happens when men oppose that truth. "Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith."

Scripture never names those two men in Exodus. But Jewish tradition, and then the church, knew them as Pharaoh's magicians. Remember when Moses stood before Pharaoh with the signs of God, these charlatans stepped forward and copied what they could. To copy Moses they turned their staffs into serpents and they made water look

like blood. For a moment it seemed they could do what God was doing.

That is the point. They were not without religion. They were impostors. They could produce a sign. They could impress a room. They could stand in front of the real work of God and make a counterfeit look close enough to confuse people.

But then God drew the line they could not cross. Their copy had a limit. But the God of Moses did not.

Paul is saying the same kind of men are still at work. They oppose the truth not only by denying it outright, but by mimicking it. They look spiritual. They can gather a crowd. They can even produce an effect. But they are corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. What they have is a form. What they lack is the power.

That still happens. Imitation can look like power. It can gather a crowd. But it can also do real damage before it is exposed. Paul is not telling Timothy that falsehood is harmless. He is telling him it will not last, and that Timothy must stay with the truth while God makes the difference plain.

The most obvious offenders are not hard for a discerning church to see. In parts of the charismatic movement and the prosperity-gospel world, men claim the gift of a prophet or healer while practicing something closer to a cheap magic show. Recently some of the major players have been exposed for getting their so-called prophetic insights from social media. That is not the Spirit. It is counterfeit power meant to prey on people's vulnerabilities.

Some fall for it because they are deceived. Others fall for it because their own greed and lust make them easy prey. Paul already said the last days would be marked by people who are lovers of money and led by various passions. A counterfeit gospel that flatters those desires will always find an audience. It is Jannes and Jambres on a modern stage — a copy of power meant to impress, and to profit from the imitation.

But the counterfeit is not always that obvious. In some settings the copy is often not a staff turning into a serpent. It is an atmosphere we can produce. We can build a room with lights, haze, volume, and well-timed music and call the mood “the presence of God.”

Daniel Henderson has warned that many churches are vulnerable here because they carry an Old Testament idea of God’s presence filling a place, and then try to manage that place. But the Spirit didn’t come at Pentecost to fill a room. The Spirit came to fill a people.

That is why some modern worship songs can become a problem. Take the song “Rest On Us.” It keeps asking the Spirit to move over us the way He moved over the waters, to come down, to fill the room, and make the heart pound. Some of the words in the song can be prayed in faith. But much of it can also train people to look for God in the air rather than to bow to Christ in the heart.

Worship is not first an event we create. It is a life captured by Jesus. The Spirit does not rest on fog machines and manipulated feeling. He works through people who repent, believe the truth, and obey it.

I am not saying we throw the baby out with the bathwater. Lights and music are not the enemy. But we must not mistake form for the heart of worship. A form of godliness can be sung as easily as it can be preached. It can move a room and still leave a person always learning, always feeling, and never arriving at the knowledge of the truth.

We do not have to lose our minds when good tools are used in a worship service. But we must not rely on the tools to do what only the Spirit can. Counterfeit power can look current. It can gather a crowd. But it cannot last. Paul says it plainly:

“But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.” 2 Timothy 3:9

Our call is the same call Paul gave Timothy. Awake to the times. Avoid what only has the form of godliness. Arrive at the truth. Stay with the gospel, stay with holy lives, stay with the Word. And trust that what is false will not be able to hide forever.

So what does perseverance look like for us?

A church awake to the times without becoming obsessed with them. Believers who will not share a table with a form of godliness that denies its power. Men and women who stop grazing on endless content and sit long enough with Scripture, prayer, and the people of God to grow in the love of Christ.

That is the answer because the root problem is not first bad information. It is disordered love. The last days are filled with people who are “lovers of self... rather than lovers of God.” A form of godliness can keep a person busy with religion and still leave that love untouched.

To arrive at a knowledge of the truth is not to finish a course. It is to come to Christ. To know Him is to love Him. To love Him is to trust Him. And to trust Him is to obey Him. That is how the power of godliness returns. Not when we consume more content, but when Jesus captures the heart that used to be ruled by self.

Younger believers, you don't need a softer Jesus. You need the real One. Older believers, don't just warn the next generation about how dark the days are. Walk with them toward the truth. Don't hand them a chart and call it discipleship. Hand them Christ.

Conclusion

The days are difficult. The deception is real. But the Lord still grants repentance. He still leads people to the knowledge of the truth. He still makes the folly of the counterfeit obvious in time, and He still uses clean vessels to rescue the captives.

Are you discerning the times, or only absorbing them? Are you avoiding what corrupts, or keeping it close because it still entertains you? Have you arrived at a knowledge of the truth, or are you always learning and never coming to Jesus?

Paul, knowing his departure was at hand, wanted Timothy to see the days clearly and still remain faithful in them. May we, by the power of the Spirit, understand the times, stay on mission, and grow in the love of Jesus — the Truth who alone can keep us to the end.