

What to Do Before It Ends (2 Timothy 3)

The emphasis in this chapter is on knowledge and responsibility. Paul informed Timothy about the character of the last days, and then instructed him how to respond. Action must be based on knowledge. Too many Christians are like the pilot who informed his passengers, “We are lost, but we are making very good time.”

“These last days” began with the ministry of Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1–2) and will continue until He returns. They are called the “last days” because in them God is completing His purposes for His people. Because our Lord has delayed His return, some people scoff at the promise of His coming (2 Peter 3:3ff.), but He will come as He promised.

Within this period of “last days” there will be “times” (seasons) of different kinds, but as the “times” draw to a close, they will become perilous. This word means “dangerous, hard to deal with, savage.” This is the same Greek word that is used to describe the two violent demoniacs of Gadara (Matt. 8:28). This suggests that the violence of the last times will be energized by demons (1 Tim. 4:1).

There is no doubt that these characteristics started to appear in Paul’s day, and now they have increased in intensity. It is not simply that we have more people in the world, or better news coverage. It appears that evil is deeper and of greater intensity, and that it is being accepted and promoted by society in a bolder way. It is not that we have small pockets of rebellion here and there. All of society seems to be in ferment and rebellion. We are indeed in “terrible times” (2 Tim. 3:1 NIV).

Paul gave Timothy three instructions to obey in order that his ministry might be effective during perilous times.

1. Turn Away from the False (3:1–9)

“From such turn away” (2 Tim. 3:5b). A faithful believer should have nothing to do with the people Paul described in this section. It is important to note that these people operate under the guise of religion: “Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof” (2 Tim. 3:5). They are “religious” but rebellious! Paul discussed three facts about these people.

(1) Their characteristics (vv. 2–5). At least eighteen different characteristics are listed here, and Paul probably could have listed more. There is an emphasis on love: “lovers of their own selves,” lovers of money (“covetous”), “lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God.” The heart of every problem is a problem in the heart. God commands us to love Him supremely, and our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:34–40), but if we love ourselves supremely, we will not love God or our neighbors.

In this universe there is God, and there are people and things. We should worship God, love people, and use things. But if we start worshipping ourselves, we will ignore God and start loving things and using people. This is the formula for a miserable life, yet it characterizes many people today. The worldwide craving for things is just one evidence that people’s hearts have turned away from God.

Of course, if someone loves and worships himself, the result will be pride. “Ye shall be as gods” was Satan’s offer to Eve (Gen. 3:5), and the result was that people “changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than [rather than] the Creator” (Rom. 1:25). Man became his own god! The creature is now the creator! “Boasters, proud [arrogant], blasphemers [given to contemptuous and bitter words]” (2 Tim. 3:2).

“Disobedient to parents” suggests that this apostasy reaches into the family. Children are “unthankful” and do not appreciate what their parents have done for them. They are “unholy” in their attitude toward their parents. “Honor thy father and thy mother” is not widely taught or respected.

The phrase “without natural affection” is the translation of one word that describes “family love.” The family is under attack these days, and as go its families, so goes the nation.

In place of the natural love that God has put into men and women and families, today we have a good deal of natural love that God has condemned (see Rom. 1:18–27; 1 Cor. 6:9–10). It is confusion, and God will judge it (Rom. 1:28–32).

Not only in homes, but also out in society and the business world, the characteristics of these perilous times may be seen. “Truce-breakers” (2 Tim. 3:3) describes people who will not try to agree. They are unyielding and irreconcilable and must have their own way.

In order to defend their position, they become “slanderers” [“false accusers”] and try to tear

down the reputations of others. Unfortunately, some of this activity goes on even among professed Christians. “Christian leaders” accuse one another in the pages of their publications.

“Incontinent” means “without self-control.” The motto of our society today is “Do your own thing and enjoy it!” Sad to say, some of the children born to these people do not always enjoy it because they are deformed or handicapped as the result of drugs, alcohol, or sexually transmitted diseases.

This lack of self-control reveals itself in a number of ways. “Fierce” means “untamed, brutal.” When these people cannot have their way, they become much like savage beasts. Instead of honoring what is good, they despise what is good and honor what is evil. In society today the standards of right and wrong have been twisted, if not destroyed. “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil,” cried Isaiah the prophet (Isa. 5:20).

“Traitors” (2 Tim. 3:4) describes people who betray others and cannot be trusted. Neither friendship nor partnership makes any difference to them; they lie and break their promises whenever doing so helps them get their own way.

“Heady” means “reckless, rash, acting without careful thought.” Paul did not condemn honest adventure, but foolish endeavor.

“High-minded” does not describe a person with lofty thoughts. Rather, it means a person who is “puffed up” with his importance. “Conceited” is a good synonym.

“Lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God” does not suggest that we must choose between pleasure and God, for when we live for God, we enjoy the greatest pleasures (Ps. 16:11). The choice is between loving pleasure and loving God. If we love God, we will also enjoy fullness of life here and forever, but the pleasures of sin can only last for a brief time (Heb. 11:25). No one can deny that we live in a pleasure-mad world; but these pleasures too often are just shallow entertainment and escape; they are not enrichment and true enjoyment.

Paul stated that these people he has just described would consider themselves religious! “Having a form of godliness” (2 Tim. 3:5) suggests an outward appearance of religion, not true Christian faith, for they have never experienced the power of God in their lives. Form without force. Religion without reality.

(2) Their converts (vv. 6–7). The fact that Paul described “silly [weak-willed NIV] women” does not suggest that all women are like this, or that men are not vulnerable to the wiles of false teachers. In Paul’s day, women were especially susceptible to this kind of experience since they had a low status in society. Whether men or women, people who fall for this false religious system have the same characteristics.

They are burdened with guilt and looking for some escape from bondage and fear. They find themselves unable to control their various desires (“divers lusts”). The emphasis here may be on sexual problems. Finally, they are always searching for truth, trying this approach and that, yet they are never able to be satisfied. This kind of person is fair game for the cultists and the religious racketeers.

These false religious leaders take advantage of the problems people have, and promise them quick and easy solutions. They “worm their way in” and soon control people’s lives. It is not long before these leaders grab their followers’ loyalty, money, and service. And their “converts” are worse off than they were before. They still have their problems, but they have been duped into thinking that all is well.

And remember, all of this underhanded activity is done in the name of religion! No wonder Paul told Timothy, “From such turn away.”

(3) Their religious leaders (vv. 8–9). Read Exodus 7–9 for the record of the contest between Moses and the Egyptian magicians. Tradition says that the magicians were Jannes and Jambres, two men mentioned by Paul (2 Tim. 3:8). These men opposed Moses by imitating what he did. When Aaron’s rod turned into a serpent, the magicians cast down their rods and they turned into serpents. Moses turned the water into blood, and the magicians followed with the same miracle. When Moses brought up all the frogs, the magicians duplicated the miracle. But when it came to the miracle of the lice, the magicians could not imitate it (Ex. 8:16–19).

Satan is an imitator; what God does, Satan counterfeits. The religious leaders in the last days will have a counterfeit faith, and their purpose is to promote a lie and resist the truth of God’s Word. They deny the authority of the Bible and substitute human wisdom and philosophy. In their attempt to be “modern,” they deny the reality of sin and people’s need for salvation. “Reprobate” is the word Paul used to describe them. This means “tested and found counterfeit.”

Jannes and Jambres were finally exposed and made fools of by the judgments of God. This will also happen to the leaders of false religions in the last days. When God's judgments fall, the true character of these counterfeits will be revealed to everyone.

2. Follow Those Who Are True (3:10–12)

Paul turned from the false leaders to remind Timothy that he (Paul) had been a faithful servant of God. It is important in these difficult days that we follow the right spiritual leaders. What are their characteristics?

Their lives are open for all to see (v. 10a). Paul had nothing to hide. Like his Master, he could say, "In secret have I said nothing" (John 18:20). "My manner of life from my youth ... know all the Jews," Paul had told Agrippa (Acts 26:4). Timothy had lived and labored with Paul and knew the man well. Paul had not hidden behind extravagant claims or religious propaganda.

They teach true doctrine (v. 10b). "My doctrine" in Paul's case meant the true faith, the gospel of Jesus Christ. No matter how appealing a preacher may be, if he does not preach the truth of God's Word, he does not deserve our support. On radio and TV today, we have a great deal of "pseudo-Christianity" which is a mixture of psychology, success motivation, and personality cults, with a little bit of Bible thrown in to make it look religious. Beware!

They practice what they preach (v. 10c). Paul's "manner of life" backed up his messages. He did not preach sacrifice and live in luxury. He gave to others far more than he received from them. He stood up for the truth even when it meant losing friends and in the end, losing his life. Paul was a servant, not a celebrity.

Their purpose is to glorify God (v. 10d). There was never a question about Paul's "purpose" in ministry: He wanted to do God's will and finish the work God gave him to do (Acts 20:24; Phil. 1:21). The apostle Paul was a man of "faith" who trusted God to meet his needs. He was a man of "longsuffering" who bore up under people's attacks. He was a man of love ("charity") who willingly gave himself to serve others.

The word patience at the end of 2 Timothy 3:10 means "endurance, the ability to stick with it when the going gets tough."

They are willing to suffer (vv. 11–12). Paul did not ask others to suffer for him; he suffered for others. The fact that he was persecuted from city to city was proof that he was living a godly life. Some people today have the idea that godliness means escaping persecution, when just the opposite is true.

I wonder how Paul would match up with today's concept of a Christian leader. He would probably fail miserably. If he applied for service with a modern mission board, would he be accepted? He had a prison record; he had a physical affliction; he stirred up problems in just about every place he visited. He was poor, and he did not cater to the rich. Yet God used him, and we are being blessed today because Paul was faithful.

3. Continue in God's Word (3:13–17)

The only way to defeat Satan's lies is with God's truth. "Thus saith the Lord!" is the final answer to every question. Evil men and deceivers are going to get worse and worse. They will deceive more and more. Why? Because they are being deceived by Satan! In these last days, there will be more deception and imitation, and the only way a believer will be able to tell the true from the false is by knowing the Word of God.

Timothy had been taught the Word of God from the time he was a child. Some people are prone to say, "Well, I needed the Bible when I was younger, but I can do without it now that I'm older." How wrong they are! Adults need the guidance of the Word far more than children do, because adults face more temptations and make more decisions. Timothy's grandmother and mother had faithfully taught him the Old Testament Scriptures. (The word whom in 2 Tim. 3:14 is plural, referring to these women; see 2 Tim. 1:5.) Timothy was to continue in what he had been taught. We never outgrow the Word of God.

This is a good place to admonish Christian parents to teach their children the Bible. In our home, my wife and I used Kenneth Taylor's Bible Stories with Pictures for Little Eyes; in fact, we wore out two copies! What a joy it was to see our older children who had learned to read share the stories with the younger ones and help them answer the questions. Little by little, the children graduated to older Bible storybooks and then to Bibles of their own. We were fortunate that our Sunday school included a Bible memory program. As soon as your child is born,

surround him with the Word of God and prayer. You will not have this opportunity after he grows up.

In this paragraph, Paul made some important statements about the Scriptures:

They are the Holy Scriptures (v. 15a). “The sacred letters” is a literal translation. The suggestion is that young Timothy learned his Hebrew alphabet by spelling his way through the Old Testament Scriptures. The word for “holy” means “consecrated for sacred use.” The Bible is different from every other book—even books about the Bible—because it has been set apart by God for special sacred uses. We must treat the Bible as the special book it is.

The way we treat the Bible shows others how much or how little we respect it. While I don’t want to become a crank in this matter, I must confess that I hate to see a Bible on the floor. When we are carrying a Bible and other books, the Bible should be on the top. There is a difference between properly marking a Bible as we study and defacing it by careless marking. I have seen people put a cup of coffee on a Bible! Paul gives us the right attitude toward the Word of God (1 Thess. 2:13).

The Scriptures lead us to salvation (v. 15b). We are not saved by believing the Bible (see John 5:39), but by trusting the Christ who is revealed in the Bible. Satan knows the Bible, but he is not saved. Timothy was raised on the Holy Scriptures in a godly home. Yet it was not until Paul led him to Christ that he was saved.

What is the relationship of the Bible to salvation? To begin with, the Bible reveals our need for salvation. It is a mirror that shows us how filthy we are in God’s sight. The Bible explains that every lost sinner is condemned now (John 3:18–21) and needs a Savior now. It also makes it clear that a lost sinner cannot save himself.

But the Bible also reveals God’s wonderful plan of salvation: Christ died for our sins! If we trust Him, He will save us (John 3:16–18). The Bible also helps give us the assurance of our salvation (see 1 John 5:9–13). Then the Bible becomes our spiritual food to nourish us that we might grow in grace and serve Christ. It is our sword for fighting Satan and overcoming temptation.

The Scriptures are true and dependable (v. 16a). “All Scripture is God-breathed” (NIV). The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture is vitally important, and a doctrine that Satan has attacked from the beginning (“Yea, hath God said?” [Gen.

3:1]). It is inconceivable that God would give His people a book they could not trust. He is the God of truth (Deut. 32:4); Jesus is “the truth” (John 14:6); and the “Spirit is truth” (1 John 5:6). Jesus said of the Scriptures, “Thy word is truth” (John 17:17).

The Holy Spirit of God used men of God to write the Word of God (2 Peter 1:20–21). The Spirit did not erase the natural characteristics of the writers. In fact, God in His providence prepared the writers for the task of writing the Scriptures. Each writer has his own distinctive style and vocabulary. Each book of the Bible grew out of a special set of circumstances. In His preparation of men, in His guiding of history, and in His working through the Spirit, God brought about the miracle of the Scriptures.

We must not think of “inspiration” the way the world thinks when it says, “Shakespeare was certainly an inspired writer.” What we mean by biblical inspiration is the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit on the Bible’s writers, which guaranteed that what they wrote was accurate and trustworthy. Revelation means the communicating of truth to man by God; inspiration has to do with the recording of this communication in a way that is dependable.

Whatever the Bible says about itself, man, God, life, death, history, science, and every other subject is true. This does not mean that every statement in the Bible is true, because the Bible records the lies of men and of Satan. But the record is true.

The Scriptures are profitable (v. 16b). They are profitable for doctrine (what is right), for reproof (what is not right), for correction (how to get right), and for instruction in righteousness (how to stay right). A Christian who studies the Bible and applies what he learns will grow in holiness and avoid many pitfalls in this world.

The Scriptures equip us for service (v. 17). Earlier Paul had called Timothy a “man of God” (1 Tim. 6:11), but here Paul states that any Christian can become a person “of God.” How? By studying the Word of God, obeying it, and letting it control his life. It is worth noting that all of the “men of God” named in Scripture—including Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, David, and Timothy—were men who were devoted to God’s Word.

Two words in this verse are especially important: “perfect” and “furnished.” The word translated “perfect” means “complete, in fit shape, in

fit condition.” It does not begin to suggest sinless perfection. Rather, it implies being fitted for use.

“Furnished” has a similar meaning: “equipped for service.” In other words, the Word of God furnishes and equips a believer so that he can live a life that pleases God and do the work God wants him to do. The better we know the Word, the better we are able to live and work for God.

The purpose of Bible study is not just to understand doctrines or to be able to defend the faith, as important as these things are. The ultimate purpose is the equipping of the believers who read it. It is the Word of God that equips God’s people to do the work of God.

The times are not going to get better, but we Christians can become better people, even in bad times. We must separate ourselves from that which is false, devote ourselves to that which is true, and continue in our study of the Word of God. Then God can equip us for ministry in these difficult days, and we will have the joy of seeing others come to a knowledge of the truth.

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