



A Study of 1st & 2nd Timothy

Terrible Times... 2 Timothy 3:1-9

I am reading from 2nd Timothy 3:1-9. If you're using a pew Bible, the passage is located on page 995. That's 2nd Timothy 3:1-9.

This is what God's Word says.

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 3:1**...But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. ² For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵ having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. ⁶ For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, ⁷ always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. ⁸ Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. ⁹ But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.

Father, we come to you this morning confessing to you our great need. Father we need and we desire that the Holy Spirit come now and take the things of Christ and make them real to our hearts...to come and take the written word and as its

true author and therefore its infallible teacher to instruct us in the truth of your Son. Open the book we pray to see what you have accomplished on our behalf, in Christ, in whose name, we pray, Amen.

The first nine verses of 2nd Timothy 3, 2 Timothy 3:1-9, make up the first of three closely connected paragraphs. These nine verses contain an explicit warning from Paul to Timothy that as he looks forward to a life of ministry he should know that terrible times lay ahead. If you have a pencil you might like to write the words **“terrible times”** in the margin of your Bible next to 2nd Timothy 3:1.

The next eight verses after that, 2 Timothy 3:10-17, make up the second of the three connected paragraphs. These eight verses contain a reminder to Timothy that in the midst of these terrible times he is to look back and to remember what he has learned from Paul’s example of faithfulness in the midst of the dreadful opposition and suffering that he has faced. Even more importantly, these next eight verses contain a reminder for Timothy to remember what he has learned from God’s Word. If you have a pencil, you might like to write these words in the margin of your Bible, **“Remember Paul’s life and the Word of God you’ve been taught.”**

And then finally, in the last of the three paragraphs, 2 Timothy 4:1-2, Paul charges Timothy concerning what he must do to faithfully discharge his responsibility as a minister of the gospel in the midst of terrible times. If you have a pencil, you might write these words in the column of your Bible, **“In the response, preach the Word.”**

If you tie those three ideas together, they sound something like this: **“Timothy, look ahead and as you do pay attention. You must keep a sharp look out for in the last days there will be terrible times. And when they come, look back on my example and to the truth you’ve been taught from God’s Word, and then look straight ahead, and stand toe to toe against those terrible times. And there is only one way to do that. Preach the Word.”**

Paul’s point, his real point, seems to be, **“Terrible times require steadfast obedience and an unwavering, relentless, commitment to the faithful preaching of God’s Word.”**

What I would like to do this morning and I hope this won’t be too ambitious, is to work our way through the first of these three paragraphs. Let’s start in 2 Timothy 3:1. Notice Paul’s words.

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 3:1**...But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. ² For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵ having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.

Now the first thing I want you to notice is that the passage contains two commands. They are easy to miss because they are separated by three verses. The first command is simple enough and occurs at the beginning of verse 1. It is **“to understand this.”** It seems a bit strange to have a biblical command as simple as, **“Understand this”** or **“Know this.”** But it is not as uncommon as you might imagine. The very first command that comes up in Paul’s Letter to the Romans,

for example, has much the same kind of feel. There in Romans Paul's command is simply to, "**Consider yourselves dead to sin.**" You see what I mean. Anyway, this first command here in 2nd Timothy 3 is to, "**Understand this.**"

The second command in this passage comes at the end of verse five. The second command is to "**avoid such people.**"

Now the first command "**understand this**" could have been translated any number of ways. It could just as easily have been translated "**mark this,**" or "**make sure you remember this,**" or even "**pay close attention to what I am about to say and remember it.**" No matter how one translates it, it is easy to see that Paul wanted to make sure Timothy understood the point he was about to make? And what was that point? The answer to that question comes at the end of verse 1. Paul wanted Timothy to understand that "**in the last days there will be terrible times.**"

Now you shouldn't think that Paul was talking about the distant future. He was not singling out our modern time or for that matter any other distant time after Timothy is dead and gone. He isn't specifically referring to the dreadful time of persecution under Nero or even the one that will come later on under Diocletian. He isn't thinking about the persecution that will come with the Spanish Inquisition or even the dreadful fires that Bloody Mary will start during the Reformation. No, Paul is talking about the whole period of time between Jesus' ascension into heaven and his ultimate return, and that time includes Timothy time and Timothy's ministry just as it includes our time and our ministry here at Grace Community. Now, you can tell that Paul includes Timothy in this period he calls the "**the last days**" because of the second command that Paul gives

Timothy at the end of verse 5. You see at the end of verse 5, Paul tells Timothy to **“avoid such people.”**

Here’s how this first paragraph fits together. First Paul tells Timothy to understand that there will be dreadful times in the last days. Then starting in verse 2 and going all the way down through verse 5, Paul describes what people will be like in the last days. And then at the end of verse 5, Paul tells Timothy to avoid such people. Now my point is really simple. It wouldn’t have made any sense for Paul to have commanded Timothy to avoid the kind of sinners that he says are proof that the last days are here unless Timothy actually lived in the last days. I hope you see what I mean. There wouldn’t be any reason to tell Timothy to avoid the kind of sinful people that characterize the last days unless Timothy was actually in the last days. Besides that, the verb **“avoid”** is a 2nd person singular verb. It is a **“you”** verb, not a **“ya’ll”** verb. That is, it is directed specifically toward Timothy.

Now you may be thinking, **“Wait a minute. If Paul’s command is directed specifically toward Timothy doesn’t that mean that the ‘terrible times’ Paul is referring to were going to be limited just to Timothy’s day. Doesn’t that mean that this period Paul calls ‘terrible times’ was really Timothy’s problem and not our problem?”**

Let me answer that question this way.

In his wonderful little commentary on 2nd Timothy, John Stott says that it almost seems superfluous for Paul to tell Timothy that there will be terrible times ahead since Paul is already locked up in prison waiting to be executed. Timothy would

have already known that there were terrible times ahead. So why tell him what he already knows? Stott answers his own question like this:

Surely *this happens* because *Paul* wants to emphasize that opposition to the truth is not a passing situation, but a permanent characteristic of the age. Perhaps he fears that Timothy will be over-optimistic, hoping that if he lies low for a while, the storm will pass. But Paul gives him no such hope. We too should 'understand this, and be quite clear about the perils and troubles which will beset us if we stand firm in the truth of the gospel.

In these last days, Paul adds, '**there will come times of stress**'. What Timothy is to understand about the last days is not that they are uniformly, continuously evil, but that they will include '**terrible times.**' Church history confirms that this has been so. As the vessel of the Christian church put out to sea, it was not to expect a smooth untroubled passage; it has been buffeted by storms and tempests and even hurricanes.¹

What that means, of course, is that terrible times are going to plague every age.

I for one didn't think the terrible times could get any worse than when Beverly and I's friend, Cyd Mizzell, was kidnapped off the streets of Kandahar, Afghanistan in January 2008. Cyd had been my secretary for four or five years when I was the vice-president of a large Christian bookstore chain. She was in seminary taking missions courses and she worked for me part time. After she graduated from seminary, she applied to go to work for a relief agency in Afghanistan. Cyd mastered the language in just two or three years and was soon on the field teaching Afghanistan women how to make extra money at home in order to supplement their meager incomes. She taught them how to embroider and she taught them a bit about personal healthcare and the like. The Afghani women loved Cyd. That is why, as I said earlier, I didn't think things could get any worse than when Cyd was kidnapped off the street in Kandahar. *But they did.* They got worse when the Taliban men who kidnapped her chose not to even

ask for a ransom but instead took her and her Muslim driver out into the barren countryside around Kandahar and murdered them both. Cyd was simply one of the gentlest people I have ever known. I grow heartsick at the thought of how they may have tortured her. Cyd was just so gentle and so modest. Murdering her would have been just about the same as murdering a small child.

I didn't think times could get any more terrible than that.

But they did. They did when a Muslim Brotherhood crowd stopped Mary Sameh George's car on a busy downtown street in Cairo last year simply because she had a cross hanging from her rearview mirror. Mary, a Coptic Christian, had been on her way to deliver medicine to an elderly woman in her church who was sick. The crowd stopped her car on the street and jumped up and down on it until they crushed it and then they pulled her from the car and beat her savagely before they finally stabbed her to death. They tore hair from her head and even ripped a part of her scalp off. Then they slit her throat and torched her car right there on the street.

The Egyptian press, of course, reported only that Mary had been attacked and stabbed to death. The press chose not to say that she had been murdered because she was a Christian. They implied in their reporting that her tragic death was simply a random act of street violence.

I didn't think times could get any worse than that.

But they did.

They did when just a few weeks ago when ISIS released a video of twenty-one Egyptian, Coptic Christian men being beheaded. The video showed the men mouthing the words “**Lord Jesus**” as they were being murdered. And it seems that no one in power anywhere in the world really cares one way or the other. It is hard to imagine it getting any worse than that. But it will. It will get worse still.

And then, Lord willing, times may get better again.

And then terrible times will start all over again.

And my point is that these “**terrible times**” are not limited to just one specific time in history but rather that they characterize the whole of the period between Christ Jesus’ resurrection and his final, glorious return. We ought never to be so naïve as to think that we are beyond “**terrible times.**” We are not. We will never be beyond them until the Lord Jesus returns.

Now before we look at verses two through five to see what people will be like in these terrible times, let me say one more thing about this phrase “**times of difficulty**” at the end of verse one that you will have already noticed I am purposely retranslating as “**terrible times.**”

Let me start off by saying that I love the ESV, but this one of those places where the ESV translation is simply not strong enough. The Greek word *καλέπος* (**kalepos**) that the ESV renders “**difficult**” here in verse 2nd Timothy 3:1 was used in classical Greek to describe the furious, violent nature of both wild animals and the raging sea. The word itself is only used one other time in the New Testament. It’s used in Matthew 8:28 where it describes two Gadarene demoniacs.

Listen to this from Matthew 8:28.

^{ESV} **Matthew 8:28** And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so *fierce* that no one could pass that way.

The word *χαλεπός* shows up in the text there as the word “**fierce**.” You can see what I mean. When you compare the two words “**fierce**” and “**difficult**,” they simply do not have the same nuance. That’s why, in this particular case, I think it best to follow the translation found in the NIV. It translates the Greek word rendered “**difficult**” in the ESV using the word “**terrible**.” The NIV renders verse one this way: “**But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days.**”

I think that gets at the idea much better than the ESV’s translation of “**difficult times**.” It’s difficult to get up at 5:30 in the morning. But it’s terrible to have to get up at 5:30 in the morning only to be taken out and shot. The difference is one of degree.

You see what I mean.

Now starting in verse two, Paul explains why there will be “**terrible times**” in the last days. And what Paul says is this. The terrible times that are about to come won’t come because of natural or even supernatural disasters. They won’t come because comets or asteroids are falling from the sky. They won’t come because Huey helicopters are streaking through the sky with machine guns in their tails. No, they won’t come on account of any of those kinds of things. They

will come rather because of people and their relentless, unending penchant for evil.

Look at verse two.

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 3:2**...For people will be **lovers** of self, **lovers** of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not **loving** good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, **lovers** of pleasure rather than **lovers** of God, ⁵ having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.

Now I could go through every single word in the list but rather than do that and perhaps lose you in the details along the way, let me do what I heard my friend Jeff Bingham do and simply group the words together by family. Let me do that by pointing out that five of the phrases describing the wickedness of the **“last days”** use some form or other of the word **“love.”**

Did you notice that?

In verse two, Paul says that in the last days people will be **“lovers of self”** and **“lovers of money.”** In verse 3, they will **“not love the good.”** In verse 4, they will be **“lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.”** That means that out of the nineteen words Paul uses to describe the sinful nature of people of the last days five of them have some connection to the word **“love.”** That means that in the last days, Timothy should come to expect that his culture will be characterized by an obsession with love, and that that obsession will involve a perverted sense of love. People will say they love, but their sense of love will be so perverted that

it would be wrong to call what they do and feel love. They will love the wrong things. Or they will love the wrong way, or they will love for the wrong reason.

It has been just a little over three years now since a Pennsylvania jury found former assistant Penn State football coach Jerry Sandusky guilty of 45 charges of the sexual abuse against a number of young boys that he was claiming to be helping as a part of his Second Mile Charity. The charges were based on his interaction with boys over a fifteen year period. When the guilty verdict finally came down, people outside the courtroom clapped and cheered. They were both happy and relieved, I suspect, that the courts had finally dealt with Sandusky's reprehensible perversions. And yet, not one reporter thought it worthwhile to ask, **"How was it that 10 young boys could ever become prey to such a monster? Where were those boy's dads? Where were the men so quick to bed their mothers and to disappear? Why were they so quick to abandon their sons and their responsibility to shepherd their own precious little boy's souls?"** I find it hard to blame the mom's for entrusting their boys to Sandusky; I'm sure they simply wanted some sort of manly influence in their son's lives. On the other hand, I find it very easy to blame the dads. Where were they? I think the answer is obvious. They were **"lovers of themselves"** or **"lovers of money"** or **"lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God."** They were disconnected or removed from their son's lives. And Sandusky, like the sadistic predator he was, gladly stepped forward to fill the gaping void in these young boy's lives.

You see Paul's point here is that in the last days people will love to love, but it won't be the sort of love that God commands. Rather, it will be the kind of love that seeks only to fulfill its own lusts, its own needs, and its own desires.

But Paul goes on. He doesn't just talk about people in the last days misunderstanding love. No, he goes on to say that in the last days people in general will misunderstand the very nature of all that is good, true, and beautiful. Here's what I mean by that...in the last days, people will lack what I like to call the basic nature of biblical humanity. Paul describes their wickedness not in terms of what they possess but rather in terms of what they do not possess. Paul says such people go through life without any of the basic natural affinities to do good.

For example in verse two, Paul says that in the last days people will be without any sort of humility. They will be proud, but not just proud. They will also arrogant. They will be without gentleness. They will be abusive. They will be without respect. And instead of being respectful, they will disobey their parents and any other authority in their lives. They will be without gratitude, without holiness, without heart, without self-control, without loyalty. No one will be able to reason with them. They will refuse to be appeased. It will be impossible to mollify them. They will be without any sort of self-control. Verse three says they will be brutal, reckless, and puffed up. Verse four says they will spew lies and treachery.

And then Paul tells Timothy he should avoid such people.

Now the question is, **“What does Paul mean when he tells Timothy ‘to avoid such people? And secondly why is avoiding such a people so important?’”**

First of all, when Paul tells Timothy to avoid such people, he means for Timothy and the Ephesians to steer clear of them...to stay away from them. Now Paul

mean for Timothy to stay away from sinners in general. He makes it clear in his other letters that our being in the world *means* that we cannot avoid sinful people. Paul does not expect us to avoid unbelieving sinners. He doesn't really want us to try. Listen to how he puts it in 1st Corinthians 5.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 5:9**...I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- ¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler-- not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. **"Purge the evil person from among you."**

You see Paul is not concerned that Christians avoid unbelieving sinners. If we do, how then will sinners ever come to hear the gospel? No, he doesn't want us to avoid unbelieving sinners. The group of people Paul wants Timothy to avoid is that group of people that says it is Christian, which claims to be in the faith, and yet lives a scurrilous life, a life that seemingly completely devoid of grace. That is the kind of person Paul is concerned that Timothy and the Ephesians avoid.

Still that leads to another question, **"Why avoid them? What real harm can they do?"**

Paul answers that question by explaining that these wicked people of the last days like to put on a show of being religious, but that that is all that it is...a show. They have the outward form, but they do not have the inward reality. And while that would be bad enough in and of itself, that's not the end of the matter.

If it only put on a show, they would merely be hypocrites. But they don't stop there. No, such people are hell-bent on replicating themselves. They are not satisfied to live out their own lives as a lie. No, they want to make captives of their wickedness. They want to lure others away. The Lord Jesus describes the kind of people Paul has in mind in Matthew 23.

^{ESV} **Matthew 23:15**...Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

You see what I mean. Paul's concern is for those kind of predatory false believers. You can tell that if you look down to verse 6.

^{ESV} **2 Timothy 3:6**...For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, ⁷ always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. ⁸ Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. ⁹ But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.

You see Paul says that such people, such wicked people, are not satisfied to keep their wickedness to themselves. They want to spread their unbelief.

Now in the same way that the verses one through five seem to show a perverted understanding of love, verses six through nine seem also to show a perverted sense of knowledge. Notice verse seven where it says that these sort of false believers are **"always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of truth."** In verse eight, they are called men who like Jannes and Jambres **"oppose the truth."** Jannes and Jambres were according to Jewish history the names of the two terrible sorcerers that Moses faced in his encounter with the gods of Egypt.

He is saying that these false teachers that try to lure other people into their way of life are just like that. Notice he says that such men are **“corrupted in mind.”** He says in verse nine, their actions are **“folly.”**

Paul is saying that in the last days, men and women will have lots of information, lots of facts, but they will lack genuine knowledge. They won't have any real sort of knowledge of God burned into their minds and souls.

In the last days there will be terrible times: times where men, women, boys, and girls will lack any sort of true understanding of love, or any sort of true understanding of knowledge. They will be consumed and carried away by self-centeredness and self-infatuation. They will be ever learning, filled with useless factoids and yet they will lack any real sort of godly wisdom or understanding.

And Paul doesn't want Timothy be like that. He doesn't want him to be naïve about what he's going to face in the ministry. He doesn't want him to think it is going to be easy. But in the same way, he doesn't want Timothy to despair. So what Paul is going to tell Timothy and us is that, **“The terrible times require steadfast obedience and an unwavering, relentless, commitment to the faithful preaching of God's Word.”**

Let me close with this short little story I adapted from Warren Weirsbe.

On Sunday morning October 19, 1856, Charles Spurgeon preached to his people from the text the Book of Malachi chapter 3, verse 10. The title of his sermon was **“Prove Me Now”** which means about the same thing as **“Try Me Now”** or **“Test Me Now.”** Spurgeon could not have picked a more ironic text if he had tried. Somewhere the course of his message, Spurgeon made the following statement:

"I may perhaps be called to stand where the thunderclouds brew, where the lightnings play, and tempestuous winds howl on the mountaintop. Should that happen, then, I am born to prove the power and majesty of our God; amidst dangers He will inspire me with courage; amidst toils He will make me strong."

Spurgeon, of course, had no way of knowing that that very evening he would be called on to go through the greatest trial of his public life and ministry. He has no way of knowing that that trial would be hammered out on the anvil of God's suffering.

Spurgeon had been called to be the pastor of New Park Street Church in London at the extraordinary young age of just twenty years old. He was immediately successful. The church that had been empty filled up overnight. In fact, the work at New Park Street grew so quickly under Spurgeon that the church leaders were forced to try to find a larger place to worship so that they wouldn't have to turn so many people away.

Someone suggested that the church rent the Surrey Gardens Music Hall, a beautiful building in a fine location not far from their own church. The hall could seat 10,000 people.

That same Sunday evening, October 19, 1856, Spurgeon arrived early at Surrey Gardens shocked to see the streets and garden area around the hall filled with a multitude of people. When the doors were finally opened, the hall filled up quickly. Because the hall was full, Spurgeon started the service a bit earlier than the time announced. He started by leading the congregation in prayer and then he announced a hymn, which the large congregation sang reverently. He then read his scripture for the evening and commented on it, when suddenly someone in the balcony began to shout **"Fire! Fire! The galleries are giving way! The place is falling!"**

In the stampede that followed, seven people were killed and 28 others were critically injured. Incredibly, Spurgeon tried to go ahead with the service, hoping that that his words would calm the crowd, but the tumult and the shouting were just too much. Spurgeon decided wisely, I think, to dismiss the congregation. He left the hall in a state of shock...a broken man. The press immediately seized

upon the event and began to pillory Spurgeon claiming that the whole tragedy was really the result of Spurgeon's vanity and pride.

At one point, Mrs. Spurgeon feared that her husband was losing his mind. "**His very reason seems to totter on the throne,**" she wrote, "**I sometimes fear he will never preach again.**"

In time, the public learned the truth about the "**Surrey Gardens Music Hall tragedy.**" It seems a number of pickpockets thought they could start a stampede and clean up picking the pockets of the frightened people as they stampeded out of the hall. As a result, Spurgeon's church generously established a fund to assist the injured and the families of those people who had been trampled to death.

A few weeks later Spurgeon was walking in the garden with his wife, both of them feeling the anguish of the tragedy. Suddenly he turned to her and said, "**My dear, how foolish I have been! Why, what does it matter what becomes of me, or what people think of me if the Lord shall but be glorified!**" Then he quoted Philippians 2:9-11, and added, "**If Christ be exalted, let Him do as He pleases with me. My one prayer shall be, that I may die to self and live wholly for Him and for His honor. Oh, wifey, I see it all now! Praise the Lord with me!**"

That's Spurgeon's story. And it's helpful I think. He certainly pressed on. He ministered another thirty-seven years after the tragedy at Surry Gardens. And here's why that matters. All of us will face terrible times...times that will stretch the limits of our faith and our endurance. And when we do, we will do well to remember that such times can only be met one way. You see, "**Terrible times require steadfast obedience and an unwavering, relentless, commitment to the faithful preaching of God's Word.**"

Let's pray.

¹ John R.W. Stott, *2 Timothy* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973), pp. 81-82.