

# In the Last Days

*2 Timothy*

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**Bible Text:** 2 Timothy 3

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Let's take our Bibles together and turn to 2 Timothy chapter 3 that we read earlier. On March the 9<sup>th</sup> 1637 Samuel Rutherford wrote from his prison cell in Aberdeen, it's in the holy land, to a fellow minister Alexander Henderson about the times in which they were living, "God has called you to Christ's side and the wind is knowing Christ's face in this land. And seeing you are with him, you cannot expect the lee side or the sunny side of the brae, that's a hill in proper language, but I know that you have resolved to take Christ upon any terms whatsoever."

Throughout this letter that we've been studying, the Apostle Paul, who is in prison, has been addressing the future of the gospel and the church. There are two things I think that strike him that you can see as you read it, if you sit it down and read it through, it doesn't take very long to read the whole letter. And as you read it in one sitting you'll discover I think, two things pressing to the forefront of your mind. One is that Paul regards the times as evil. They're bad times.

It would be interesting if we had Paul here to day and we were to interview him and ask him for an assessment of why it was he thought that the times were bad. I don't think he would point initially to our newspapers or news broadcast, I don't think he would point to the quality of our television shows or our movies, I don't think he would discuss the direction of our politics for good or bad or whatever anywhere in the developed world. I don't think he would discuss any of those issues that perhaps are forefront of our minds, I think the Apostle Paul on the basis of this letter, that he's written to Timothy, would want to talk about the state of the church. He would want to say that really the big problem that the world is facing is the church and that in the economy of God it is the state of the church that is of supreme importance. And that when the church has begun to deviate from the gospel, when the church has begun to see the things that the Apostle describes in this letter, then there is discouragement and our own faith is destabilized as we hear of those things. So then, on the one hand there is the evil of the times and the Apostle would want to explore just exactly what those things are.

The other thing that you are struck with as you read the letter, is the nervousness of Timothy. I'm afraid that I cannot get over the idea that somehow or other our commentators are desperate to make Timothy seem not quite as unsettled and upset as he really was. When you read the letter it seems that there are indications over and over and

over again in the text that Paul really feared for this minister. That he really feared that this minister was going to lose the plot or that he was going to parachute out of the ministry, that there was a real danger in the life of this man of losing the focus of his attention on the gospel of the Lord Jesus and that in doing so he would be diverted, that he would spend his energies elsewhere or that he would be overwhelmed with fear. Overwhelmed with a sense that things were not going well and therefore perhaps the best thing to do would be to avoid appearing to stand out and thereby attracting criticism or danger to himself.

So the Apostle Paul's words are not only relevant I think, to Timothy in his days because of that they're relevant to you and I today because the days in which we live are not good days. For the church of Christ, things are not going well. We can pretend they're going well, we can manufacture in our minds a sense that things are good because in this local church here we have a full church on Sundays and therefore things must be going better for the kingdom than we thought.

What Paul teaches us from this letter and from the book of Acts is that the church as an institution with its structure of leadership, its elders, is not simply designed to be a layer of bureaucracy on your Christian life. It is not designed simply to add another tier, if you will, of responsibility and obligation on you as a Christian person to make life more uncomfortable for you the way the government does. Tier after tier after tier of obligation and taxes here, there and everywhere. I mean, I've never lived anywhere where you have to pay three loads of income tax, it's an unusual experience. I have to say I've never paid as little income tax because, you know, when you're paying sixty percent income tax in other places, or if you're lucky forty percent or if you're really at the bottom of the rung twenty percent, that really takes a bite out of your salary, let me tell you that but that's another matter all together and I'm not going down that road, you'll be glad to hear. I'm going to focus on what I'm saying.

The Bible doesn't say that the church as an institution is another layer of bureaucracy on your life, rather what the Apostle teaches in Acts and here is that the church is instituted to maintain the doctrinal purity of the Christian message, of the gospel. And that it is borne out of an awareness that God's people are always going to be influenced by or threatened by subversive individuals or movements which creep in to subvert and destroy the truth. And so the continuation of truth, the life of the kingdom and the furtherance of the mission of the church are absolutely vital to get the gospel right, to get the gospel into our hearts and to get the gospel out to the world.

Now the Apostle then, has already written about some of the features of the times in which he lived and Timothy lived and we lived. We can see that things are bad for him, he's been arrested, he's been imprisoned, he's bound in chains and is going to be executed. Everybody in Asia, he says, had repudiated him, even fellow believers, perhaps out of fear of consequences of being collateral damage whenever Paul gets executed, even other believers have distanced themselves from the Apostle now in prison.

And from prison Paul is writing to Timothy and he's saying to Timothy, "Don't be ashamed of the gospel, don't be ashamed of me the Lord's prisoner, don't be ashamed of these things. Be prepared in fact to suffer for the gospel, to suffer for it." And let me say this, suffering for the gospel is still a reality today. There are people today in particular disciplines for example in universities who will not get tenure because of their commitment to the gospel, there are people applying for university places who will not get the place they seek because they've been explicit in their Christian testimony, rightly so. We live in days in which it can go against you to be explicitly Christian as you apply for jobs and if you're in the job market in our current climate.

So, suffering for the gospel is not some remote thing that people are doing in Africa or Asia, this is something that we do at a lesser level, well actually is it a lesser level? It is the level in which we in our comfort zones are being attacked all the time as followers of Jesus today. So we're to be prepared says Paul to suffer for the gospel.

And there's a sense in which you understand why this is the case. The Son of Man has come in the flesh, God has come in the flesh, God has broken into the world, all hell has been let loose against God's Christ. They crucified the Lord of glory, they are not going to sit idly by while Jesus' followers rearticulate the message about Jesus. All hell is abuzz with anger and angst against the church of God and against you who are the Lord's people. That's the reality. And we gather in that context this morning for worship.

And it's against that background then that Paul says to Timothy, "There is something you need to understand, something you need to get your head around, something you need to be clear about in your mind. You need understanding, understand this." That's his command as he writes to Timothy and there are things that you and I need to understand this morning as we gather for worship.

We need to understand the times we live in. We need to understand these things so that we'll be realistic. Christian people are not always realistic people. Sometimes we're swept along with a current of triumphalism. This was one of great things, wasn't it, of the late twentieth century? I know that you all know that I've been forty years in the ministry and I cannot avoid that ever more because of the memory of that last week. I appreciate it, but I don't like being reminded. Fortunately, I started off young, I was about two I think when I became a minister and, that's my story and I'm sticking to it, and you can see the baby pictures to prove it. There I am in my baby pictures in the pulpit.

The only one of the very few things and there are very, very few things by the way about being around this long, is that you can see that things come and go. There have been, we lived in Britain and for about the last thirty years that we were in Britain we would have these waves of influence that would come and crash upon British shores. And they came from the West, I'm not saying where they came from, but they came from across the Atlantic and they would bash against the shores. And people would come up with these new bright ideas about why it was that the church should be triumphant and victorious. After all, there we were in England and we're a bit negative about life anyways, that's where we start and then when we see going wrong we get even more depressed and then

when people tell us that they're not coming to church anymore we get even more depressed and when you start off depressed and you get more depressed that's a very place to be. And so the people would come in to cheer us up and they would tell us that all we had to do was to get out on the streets, which we did, and march around the capital cities and the major cities of the land and claim the ground for Jesus. If only we claimed every street and every village for Jesus, the tide would turn and the gospel would triumph and there would be victory at large. And that's what we did. We marched around, we claimed the ground, "Lord, this is your ground, we speak against the powers of darkness, we pray that you would banish the powers of darkness, we claim the ground for Jesus." We did that for forty years and it never turned the tide and the decline kept going.

There's an era of triumphalism, you know, we sneak it in all the time. We think that the gospel is growing and we think that we can have a victory for the gospel, we use outlandish language like redeeming culture, transforming the city, enormous success in numbers as people come to Christ.

Now let me say this that that is not happening anywhere and it has never happened anywhere. Paul writes these things to us and he says, "I want you to understand this, I want you to know the context in which you are placed. I want you to know where you are in society, the things that are around and the things that potentially creeping into the church because the church is composed of sinful people who are bringing these things in with them, the ethos of the world in with them." Paul says to Timothy, "There's something you need to get your mind around, these are the last days. The last days are here. Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulties."

Now that's a realistic call. Paul has just finished the end of chapter 2 and he's ended it in a little bit of an upbeat note, he's been talking about people who are being diverted one way or another. He's talking about other people who are being influenced by false teachers and he says to Timothy, "It is the business of you as a minister of the church at large to try and reach those people. To try and pray that God in his goodness would grant them repentance, leading them to a knowledge of the truth so that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil after being captured by him to do his will." That's a great and lofty hope and goal.

Paul says, "It may happen, God may use you to do that, to rescue many people from the snare of the devil. That's what we pray for, that's what we work for, that's what we do." But says Paul, "I want you to remember that you're doing that in the context of the last days. Understand this. Understand the times in which you have been placed."

Now where does he get this expression "the last days?" Has he just kind of manufactured this by spontaneous combustion within his mind that is alive with direct revelation from God as an Apostle of Jesus Christ? And the answer, of course, is no. This language derives from the Hebrew scriptures. It was an expression that was well known generally in Paul's day among the Jewish Rabbis who divided time into two distinct ages, the present age, troubled and sinful, the age to come, blessed and ruled by God. And in the Hebrew scriptures this phrase "the last days" is to be found in the book of Genesis as well

as elsewhere in the books of Moses and throughout the Hebrew scriptures. The last days are to be the days of the king, the king who will emerge from the tribe of Judah. These are the days of the one who will bring the Kingdom of God down to earth, the days of the Messiah. These are the days in which the Holy Spirit will be poured out in all his power according to the prophet Joel and Ezekiel and Jeremiah, days of the Spirit, days when God begins to change hearts, forgive sins.

These are the days in which the Temple of God will be built. We read that from Isaiah chapter 2 at the beginning of the service, we read how it was that in the latter days the mountain of the Lord that is, the mountain of God's Temple will grow in size and influence and people from the nations, that is the Gentile nations, the Goyim will come and they make their way to the mountain of God, Zion, the city of God, the people of God and will worship God in those days.

And these are those days when God is building his final Temple in Christ and men and women are being attracted to him. And the latter days according to Daniel and others are days in which false prophets and false teaching will abound, when evil will be encouraged, where there will be deception and distress among people in the nations. These final days, these last days are the days of the end, they are the days that mark the last episode in the human story.

And as the Apostle writes about these last days he is gathering up all of that teaching and he says, "The last days are already here." He uses it by the way, both in the future tense and he uses present tense language to describe how we should live and so on in these last days. The last days are here, they've begun and you're living in these last days. And he says to Timothy, "I want you to know this. The last days were initiated by the arrival of the Messiah."

As Daniel chapter 10 verse 14 describes it, the heavenly being comes to Daniel and interestingly he uses similar language that Paul uses here. He comes to Daniel and says, "Daniel I need you to understand, I need you to understand what's going to happen in the last days." He just described a heavenly being who comes and he describes the coming of the Son of Man who comes in great power and glory at the climax of history. He describes a deceiver who will deceive the whole world and lead it into evil. He describes those last days as days that are going to come on the earth. And Peter on the day of Pentecost announces that the sights and sounds of that day of Pentecost are the great clue that the last days have arrived. He quotes the prophet Joel and he says, "These are the days in which God said the Spirit would come in great power and would come upon all flesh, men and women, Jews and Gentiles." These are the last days.

The writer to the Hebrews, he begins his letter by saying this, "That God in the past spoke to our forefathers by the prophets but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." These are the last days.

This phrase applies to the whole period between the resurrection of Jesus and the return of Jesus. These are the last days. Yes, some of these things will intensify and they will

towards the end of the last days but we live in this period. Paul is writing to Timothy to remind him of this. In verse 1 and verse 9 he uses the expressions to describe the future aspect of these last days, but he also uses present tense imperatives in verse 1 and 5. He refers to the false teachers whose activity, present tense, is to disturb and distort the truth of God. And throughout the last days, there is posed a threat both to the truth of God and to the Israel of God. Jesus says this, "Behold the hour is coming, indeed it has come when you will be scattered each to his own home and will leave me alone yet I am not alone for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you so that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation but take heart I've overcome the world."

What is the feature of the last days for the believer? Tribulation. This is the great tribulation. Great not because of its intensity but because of its immensity. Not because it is focused but because it is long, it is a great long period where the church in the world is suffering trouble, trial, assault, tribulation. It will intensify as the end nears, so much so that Jesus says, "Will the Son of Man find faith on the earth when he comes?"

But we're in the last days, the last days are here, the last days are difficult. He says, "they're hard to bear" that's what the word means. Hard to bear, difficult to deal with. He's saying to Timothy, "that's the kind of situation you find yourself in." These are menacing days, dangerous days.

They don't go on, of course, at the same level of intensity. They vary, sometimes they're worse than others, sometimes they're more intense than at other times. Sometimes the boat of the church seems to be in calm waters and steadily moving forward. There have been such times in the history of the church. At other times, it seems the boat of the church is being tossed and buffeted by every wind. And seems we despair of life itself. Paul says to Timothy, "I want you to understand that these are difficult days. I don't want you to be caught off guard. I don't want you to throw up your hands in horror and think the world is coming to an end." You know that's a temptation of God's people. In every generation Christian people have been tempted to think this, "Things cannot get any worse." My granny said that and they got worse.

Why are things as bad as they are? You know, as if to say, "Where do you think you're are? Do you think you're in glory yet? Do you think that you're in heaven yet?" why are things as bad as they are? Don't you take it seriously when the Bible says that we're living in a sinful world. A world that is under God's judgment already not just in the future but right now. And one of the ways that God judges the world right now is to give them up to do what's in their heart to do. They want it, let them have it. Let them reap the consequences of their own behavior. The world *is* under judgment but no one will believe that.

These are dangerous days, they are difficult days. Why isn't the gospel making a difference? Because the gospel is facing invincible unbelief in the hearts of men and women. They are not gagging to get the gospel. They are not waiting for us to turn up at their door and smile lovingly at them and tell them the four spiritual laws, they're just not waiting for it. There is invincible unbelief in the hearts of men and women.

Paul says, "Be positive, of course." We mustn't be negative but don't be over-optimistic. The church *can* make a difference. The church has in the past often acted as a kind of brake on the worst excesses of fallen society. Sometimes the church has acted as a foot on the accelerator to economic and social progress but even those things were shot through with human sin and selfishness.

The last days are difficult days. They started, you will remember, the last days started with the world killing God in the flesh. That's how they started. No wonder they're bad. Do you think the world is going to treat you and I differently when they killed God in the flesh? We know our own weaknesses and our excesses and our little eccentricities. We all have them. The world doesn't hate us for those, it hates us because it hated Jesus. Jesus said that, "They will hate you because they hated me first. In this world you will have tribulation." It's the reality. The last days are here and the last days are difficult. There's great apostasy as people bail out of the faith for fear of their lives. There is a multiplying of false prophets, there are doctrines of demons. The last days are difficult.

And then the third thing he says here is that the last days are godless. In verses 2-4 that's why they're difficult because the context or the environment in which we live is an environment of godlessness. He describes here the kinds of people who live in these last days, the characteristics of such people. He is going to go on to talk about heretics and heresy and people who spread evil by spreading false doctrine and dead religion. And he's going to show us, though we won't get to that this morning, that although we often bemoan moral collapse in society he bemoans doctrinal indifference or doctrinal error as even more serious than moral collapse in society. We moan about the standard of television, or we moan about the standard of morals in school and so on. The Apostle Paul would moan about the standard of Christian teaching in the church first of all because that's where it begins, it's the truth of God, that's where it begins.

He describes that this false teaching that comes into the church emerges out of an environment of general godlessness. And how does he sum up this general godlessness? Notice what he says, he says that fundamentally godlessness is a misdirection of love. We were made as human beings, we were made to be lovers. God is love. God from all eternity has had a subject and an object of his love. The Father, the Son and the Spirit within the Godhead have had an outlet for their love and when Jesus prays that we'll experience love he wants us to experience love as God has experienced it himself within the Godhead. God is love because love always has to have an object. God has always had someone to love. The Father has always loved the Son, the Son has always loved the Father. We were made to love.

And yet notice, that what's wrong with the world is that love itself has been distorted. Look at how he puts it here, "Lovers of self, lovers of money," verse 2, "not loving good, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God." You see where it starts? It starts with our first love. Lovers of self. You take that and you can apply it in so many situations. I love myself and I want you. I love myself and I want what you have. It works its way out in so many ways in our lives.

I'm on Facebook, I've got a lot of friends. Some of them are a bit weird and some of them are you. And just this past week there was a little Facebook piece announcing breaking news that here it is, ready for it? The earth revolves around the sun. Okay, we all knew that. And then there are these brackets and brackets, this might upset a few out there who still think that the world revolves around them. It's true. To be in love with oneself is the essence of sin. Martin Luther used the expression "homo incurvatus in se," man turned in on himself.

Augustine, great theologian, wrote about two cities marked by two loves. I'll give you a longer quote. He talks about the city of man that's marked by the love of self to the exclusion of the love of God. "These are the two loves," he writes, "the first is holy, the second foul. The first is social, the second selfish. The first consults the common welfare for the sake of a heavenly society, the second grasps at a selfish control of social affairs for the sake of arrogant domination. The first is submissive to God, the second tries to rival God. The first is quiet, the second restless. The first is peaceful, the second troublemaking. The first prefers truth to the praises of those of those who are in error, the second is greedy for praise however it may be obtained. The first is friendly, the second envious. The first desires for its neighbor what it wishes for itself, the second desires to subjugate its neighbor. The first rules its neighbor for the good of its neighbor, the second for its own advantage." It's very easy to illustrate this.

When we were in London we lived in Richmond, a trendy suburb of London, not really a suburb, more urbanized than suburban but in that trendy part with all kinds of media people there so we would often send people out into the streets, our own young people with cameras and our microphones and the people on the streets of Richmond were always very happy because they thought maybe it might be the BBC and this might be the break they were always looking for. So they were always ready to answer questions and one of the times that we sent out for one of these box things to ask them the question, "Why wasn't it a perfect world?" And the interesting thing was that almost a universal answer was this, "People are looking out for themselves." People are looking out for themselves. These weren't Christian people.

One day I was walking the dog and I passed a stockbroker's office and in the window of the stockbroker's office was this big sign and it was referring to a Chancellor of the Exchequer, he is the guy that hikes up the taxes every year in the UK and he's hated, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. We refer to him as the Chancellor of the Exchequer, you don't want to call him by name because you don't want to think of him as a human being. And very often he is known by his address. He lives in number 11 Downing Street, Number 11. And this advert read like this, "Stop looking out for Number 11 and start looking out for Number 1." That's the kind of society we live in, this gravitational pull of self that manifests itself in Christian circles in a kind of narcissism whereby I come to church and I'm looking out for me, what do I get out of it? What do I take home with me? What is the net result of the service? What am I gonna walk away with today? Instead of, am I here for God? For God's glory? For God's greater good? To hear God? To acknowledge God?



This love of self manifests itself in a rationalism that insists that my reason must be satisfied before I will give God my allegiance. All my questions must be nice and neatly answered before I will give God my heart. That all my questions must be resolved before I will give him the undivided allegiance publicly that I owe to him. Self-love.

And where self-love rules love of money follows, notice that. Lovers of money. The false teachers talked a lot about money, they used the money for their own ends. The Bible by the way never denigrates the usefulness of money. Jesus never targeted one group or the other, he never targeted the rich because they had it or the poor because they didn't have it. What the Bible does do is this, it warns against the love of money and says, "The love of money is the root of all evil." And you can check the default setting of your heart. If you've got a lot of money, you're worried you're going to lose it. If you've got a little money, you're worried about the fact that you haven't got enough. And you can become so preoccupied with that that it's the only thing you can think about, you can't get beyond it, you can't get out of that mindset. I'm talking about those of us who perhaps feel we don't have very much and you're in hard straits at the moment. You lie awake at night and what are you thinking about? You're thinking about the fact that you don't have enough money. Down the road, what's going to happen? Now there is a legitimate concern and in its right place it is wise to make provision and so on and I'm not saying anything about that but you see how easily the default setting of our hearts is to be preoccupied with that which has captured our love. "The love of money is the root of all evil."

Not only that, do you notice, "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God." And again pleasure is one of God's good gifts to us, he has put so many things in your life and mine that are intended to give us pleasure to all of our senses. And we're meant to enjoy them, they're given to us richly to enjoy. Let no one spoil that.

But what does it mean to be a lover of pleasure rather than a lover of God? It is when the pleasure becomes a kind of God substitute, I suppose. Where somehow or other the love of God is no longer part of the agenda of my life, where I find no pleasure in him, I find pleasure in all these other legitimate things, but I find no pleasure in him. Once you get to that stage, you're a lover of pleasure rather than a lover of God. Paul is not necessarily being hard on the pleasure but he's saying that's where you find your heart's love lying and not in love of God, you've crossed a line, you're a lover of pleasure rather than a lover of God.

What does self-love look like? He gives a long list here: proud, arrogant, abusive, slandering others. Why do we slander others? We want to make other people look bad so that we look good. That's why we gossip, isn't it? We just sow a little seed of doubt in somebody's mind about somebody else, then they'll think better of us. It doesn't always work like that, but that's the plan. Disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, treacherous, reckless swollen with conceit. We've made ourselves the center of the world.

The Beatles, those great philosophers, summarized it in one of their songs. It's before my time but I do remember the words because I looked them up on Wikipedia, "Please please me, whoa yeah, like I please you." Those are the words, I like the "whoa yeah" bit, I thought you would too. "Please please me." Self-love starts there. Whatever it is, whether it's sitting in church listening to the music, listening to the sermon, "Please please me." Whether it's in a relationship with someone else, looking at them and thinking, "You're here for my convenience, please entertain me, please please me." Whoa yeah, please please me.

It's making ourselves the center of the world and wanting everybody else to dance attention on us. We even do it now in our society to the government, we say to the government, "Please please me. You know, do this and that and the other thing for me. Do it all for me, I don't want to be doing anything, I just want my life to be taken care of. Thank you very much. Please please me." We make ourselves the center of the world.

Well, says Paul, that's the society we live in. Don't be surprised about it. Don't be reared by it. Don't let it knock you off course. This is the way it is, we live in the last days and it will get worse but don't let that effect you either because where is your confidence, where is your confidence? What has happened in these last days is this, Jesus rose from the dead, Jesus reigns from heaven, Jesus is guiding his church, Jesus will come again and when he comes again he will bring an end to this world system. There will be a full stop put on the story of humanity and all these things will dissolve and be renewed.

He'll come and do one of these rehabilitation jobs you do to old Victorian houses in west Philadelphia where you take the shell and you totally transform it. He will take this old planet and he will totally transform it. He'll take you, your body, transform it, give you a body like his glorious body, that's our goal, our destiny. These are the last days, these last days will not last because Jesus will return.

Let's pray.

*Father thank you for the glorious hope of our Savior the Lord Jesus' coming. Help us, Lord, to live realistically in the days in which we live, not be thrown by the bad news that we hear as if something strange is happening. But rather as Paul has taught us that these things will be there, they will come and go, they will not be always as intense as they might be at some points, but nonetheless, this is the ethos of the world. We pray that you would keep us safe in our faith in Christ. We ask in his strong name. Amen.*