

Stuff Happens

2 Timothy

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Bible Text: 2 Timothy 3

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Let's turn in our Bibles to 2 Timothy, chapter 3. The Apostle Paul is giving us a bit of a reality check. He's writing to Timothy but he's writing also to us. He expects us to be listening in to what he is saying. And he's talking about the last days. You'll see that from chapter 3, verse 1, that's what he has in perspective. He wants to give us a reality check lest we think that our lives will always be undisturbed by wrong ideas or by evil people. He wants to give us a reality check lest we think that the church and the gospel will have an uninterrupted movement forward to greater and greater success in the world.

Listen to what he says, verse 1, "In the last days there will be times of difficulty." Of course, there'll be normal days. There'll be normal days in the last days when people will simply ignore Christians, tolerate to some degree or another, Christians. They may not like the Christian faith but either they will not be bothered to do anything about it or will not have access to the power to do anything about it. But there will be other days, other days when Christian people in the Christian faith are marginalized, misrepresented, caricatured in the public space. And yet other days when Christians will be physically or emotionally persecuted in a series of outright attempts to destroy the Christian faith. Paul is aware of that. "In the last days," he says, "there will be times of difficulty."

It's the same in relation to the world. There have been periods in history of the world in which the church finds itself, in which the world is pretty well organized and ordered, in which the restraints upon bad behavior are in place. Where we are able to live peaceful and quiet lives exercising our religious freedoms and enjoying them to a full degree. But there will be other days, other days when it seems the whole structure of society is falling apart. Where bad behavior and evil men seem to rule the day. I think of 18th century England, not because I was there, but because I've read about it. Some people were downstairs earlier on thought I had been there, but I'll forgive the children for that misunderstanding. But, in 18th century England, England was degenerating to such a degree that the historians say that if it had not been for the evangelical awakening they would have descended into a revolution worse than the French Revolution. They were terrible days. I think of the early 20th century, Germany, the seed bed of the reformation. There comes a center of evil in Europe.

Society is more or less good and more or less evil at different stages in the history of the world. And as Paul says in the early verses of this chapter, sometimes that evil invades

the church to such a degree that you can't tell the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the tares. You can't distinguish, as it were, the godly from the ungodly within the church itself. You notice that he talks about people who, in verse 5, have the appearance of godliness. That is, have an appearance of being Christians but they deny the power of it. They haven't experienced the power of it. They deny the power of the cross. They deny the power of the gospel. They reject the very heart of it. False teachers who continue, he said at the early part, continue to use subtle strategies to infiltrate the churches and who target the most vulnerable members of our congregations.

In the last days, says Paul, there will be difficulties. And he's still in the same theme as we come to the section we've read today. And in these last days, he says, it matters whom you follow. It matters what you expect and it matters that you persevere.

It matters whom you follow. Notice that he addresses Timothy here and he says some positive things about Timothy. We've been noticing as we've been reading this letter that this man Timothy is in a very serious position spiritually. Paul is anxious about him. He draws out of his repertoire every rhetorical device he can muster to reach the heart of this young man, Timothy. Now encouraging him, now challenging him, now confronting him, charging him. Every way he possibly can to arrest this man's movement away from the gospel, the unsteadiness that has gripped him, the fear of the future. Paul uses all of these to get his heart.

And here he's attempting a positive approach. You notice that he reminds Timothy of his past, of what he had done in the past. "You followed my teaching," he says, "you followed it. You observed it. You agreed with it. You understood it. You got a grip on it. You made it your own." Writing in his first letter to Timothy he was able to speak to Timothy about other people and said, "If you put these things before the brothers you'll be a good servant of Christ Jesus. Being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you followed. You followed. That's what you were like, Timothy. You remember those days. You remember when you got your head around the truth of the gospel, when your heart embraced the truth of the gospel, when you lived for the truth of the gospel, Timothy. Remember those days."

"And let me remind you of what it was like then. You followed my teaching. My teaching." He's drawing our attention to the content of what Timothy understood and believed in contrast to the false teachers about which he's been speaking. People whom he explains back in 1 Timothy, "Who follow deceptive demons and lying leaders causing some people to abandon the Christian faith altogether. Timothy, back then you had clearly drawn a line in the sand and you turned your back from the false teachers and you clung to my teaching." Here's Paul now speaking as an apostle of the Lord Jesus with the authority of Jesus behind him. "You clung to my teaching back then." And that teaching was Paul's doctrine, his theology. It was the articulation and summary of that divine word revealed to the church, embraced by the apostle, taught by the apostle and believed by Timothy. From the earliest days, from the earliest days of Christianity. Christian people have devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, to the doctrine taught by the apostles recognizing that these men had been with Jesus, were performing the signs of an apostle,

had been authorized by the Lord himself, had been empowered by the Holy Spirit to rearticulate the message of Jesus, to supplement the message of Jesus, to be Jesus' spokesman in the world. Says Paul to Timothy, "You remember. You remember that's what you followed. You followed sound theological truth. You built your life on it. You built your ministry on it. That was where you started, that was the foundation of who you are." And there's a sense of which all of us Christian people, not just those of us who are ministers, but all of us as Christian people, have to be built on a solid foundation of truth, of theology, of doctrine. That's not just an academic thing, you see.

I was trying to minister to some young people recently at a seminary and they're hoping to become ministers and they were asking me questions about practical theology. I said, "You could bend practical theology," and they had no idea what I was talking about. And I said that, of course, because I was speaking the language of heaven but I'll translate it for you. You can put practical theology in the trash can actually because what you will need, what you will need as a minister and as a Christian in tough days when people are attacking you, when the gospel itself is at stake, when you're being disoriented by the circumstances of your life, what your soul needs in those days is what you know about God. That your heart is firmly caught up with God. That you know the God that you serve, the God that has revealed himself to you in Christ Jesus. Paul says to Timothy, "You remember. You remember. It's where you started. You observed my teaching and you clung unto it, you followed it."

Martin Luther wrote this about the teaching of the apostles. He said this, "When God's holy word arises it is always its lot that Satan opposes it with all his might. At first he rages against it with force and wicked power. If that promises no success, he attacks it with false tongues and erring spirits and teachers. What he is unable to crush by force, he seeks to suppress by cunning and lies. This was his strategy at the beginning when the gospel first came into the world, he launched a mighty attack against it through the Jews and the Gentiles and shed much blood and filled Christendom with martyrs. When this did not succeed, he raised false prophets and erring spirits and filled the earth with heretics."

"You remember," says Paul, "that at the beginning you followed my teaching. It was this that fortified you. For the work of the ministry, it was this that helped you to be prepared for whatever was coming. And with my teaching you observed my conduct. My conduct gave credibility to my teaching. You saw my aim in life. What was my aim in life? It was to preach Christ crucified. It was know nothing else than Christ. It was to follow Christ, to please Christ, to glorify God and to be to the praise of God's glory. You saw my aim in life was all God and was all of Christ. You saw that. And you saw the outcome of that. You saw what characterized my day-to-day Christian experience, my faith. That in spite of all the things that I experienced, I clung on in faith to the Lord Jesus. While I was bruised and battered and broken by life's experience, I continued to trust in the Lord Jesus. You saw my patience, my perseverance."

"You saw my love for other people in spite of people very often people were assaulting me, they were misrepresenting me, they were attacking me. But you saw through it all I

continued to love those people. I love them. I love the church. Even when people in the church were defaming me and attacking me, I loved the church. And you saw that I loved the lost. I loved those who were outside of Christ, who were in opposition to the things of God, you saw my love and you saw my steadfastness. For that love was tested and my commitment to Jesus was tested and my faith in Christ was tested. But you saw my steadfastness that I kept keeping on. You saw that. You saw the credibility of the gospel in my life.”

“And, Timothy, you know my experience. You know, Timothy, what that meant in practice. You know my persecutions. Look at that, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me in Antioch, at Iconium and Lystra.”

Timothy hadn't been around when those had happened, but he'd been growing up in a Christian home and his mother and his grandmother had told him the stories, the exploits of the Apostle Paul. He knew what had been going on in Paul's life and experience. Persecutions, things that he suffered for religious reasons. Sufferings, more general things that we have to put up with in our lives. Both an outward challenge to our faith and the inward struggle that goes along with being a believer. The inward struggle, everybody suffers. Whether you're a Christian or a non-Christian you suffer, but I want to say this, a Christian struggles more often than a non-Christian does because we have to struggle with pain or evil in our lives knowing that there is a good God that introduces into our lives a complexity of struggle as we ask questions that the ungodly never ask. As we struggle with questions the ungodly never come up with because we are in a broken world believing in a good God who is guiding our lives in all of history forward to his purposes.

And our very faith introduces into our life a struggle, a suffering that is unique to those who believe. Paul says, “You had my record, you've heard the story. Antioch, as the leading citizens ran me out of town. In Iconium where I barely escaped a stoning. Lystra where I was stoned, dragged out to the town limits and left lying for dead. You know my story. You know where I've been. You know that I have not been spared suffering for Jesus' sake.” Here's the Apostle you see and he says, “In spite of these things I endured them all and the Lord rescued me.” You notice that the Lord didn't spare him, the Lord rescued him. It wasn't that somehow or other there was a kind of a Star Trek theme because the new movie's out and some of us will be seeing it this week hopefully. Or not as permission is granted by superior authorities within the home. But there's no way in which you get beamed up out of trouble as a believer. “Beam me up, Scotty.” Remember? There's no way that happens to us as believers, we go through it all. He brought through them, not out of them. He wasn't spared them, he says, but through it he was with me and out of it he brought me. And you can see where Paul gets his comfort from. He quotes here from Psalm 34 and the writer is speaking about David, the righteous sufferer. “The righteous suffered who endures all kinds of things. The righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their trouble. Many are the afflictions of the righteous but the Lord delivers them out of them all.”

Paul is quoting from that. In other words, he's found his comfort there. He's found his comfort in seeing that he's part of this great fellowship of grace, the communion of the saints. He's part of the suffering community of the righteous that preeminently includes the Lord Jesus himself, THE righteous one. THE righteous one who did not hesitate, as we've just sung, to go to Calvary to take up the cross himself and die on that cross on Calvary.

Paul sees himself in the fellowship of suffering. He is writing to Timothy and he's saying, "Do you know? You've heard my teaching, you've seen the evidence of its reality in my life but I want to bring before you, Timothy, my credentials on which I trust you will build your own life and ministry. And here is the supreme credential of them all, I have suffered for the gospel. I've endured for the gospel. You see, for the Apostle Paul the evidence of reality in our lives is not that we are carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease. The evidence of reality in our lives is not that somehow the city is captured for Jesus or the nation is captured for Christ. The reality is that as we follow Jesus we suffer with him and we suffer for him and we suffer as his people. Paul says, "You saw these things, it matters whom you follow in these days." Are you following the Apostle, are you following the Apostle as he follows Jesus and his life?

And in these last days, it matters what you expect. It matters what you expect. Unrealistic expectations often derail the believer. In Britain there's a course that's an evangelistic course and you can go through that course and never know that following Jesus might involve suffering or persecution or a cross to bear. And in verses 12 and 13, Paul broadens things out to a general principle. Listen to what he says, "Indeed not only have I suffered," says the Apostle, "indeed all who live or who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus, will be persecuted."

That's a categorical principle that he's enunciating here. He's describing the Christian life, the godly life. This is not a subgroup so that those of us who are in church this morning and there's the godly, and you know who you are, because you're looking down your nose at the rest of us because you're really spiritual. It's not that group that he's talking about. I hope there isn't a group like that. He's referring to all Christians, the godly, the godly life. The godly life is what we're introduced to by the grace of God.

Godliness involves, what? It involves reverence for God. An awareness of God, a knowledge of God, a love for God. A greater or less priority given to God. I say greater or lesser because all at various stages in our Christian growth and maturity. Some of us have been going on a lot longer and we've in many ways, surrendered to the claims of God in more and more areas of our lives. So, we are more or less godly depending on where we are in the spectrum of Christian maturity. But it is a feature of all Christians that we are godly people. That is, we are aware of him, we are conscious that we live our lives under his eye, under his authority. That things are not happening by chance or accident, that he is in control of our lives. That we are answerable to him. We are more or less conscious of this off and on in our lives because we know God. We want to be more godly, we want to be more aware of God. But we are, if we are Christian at all, we are

aware of God and we are living under the eye of God. The godly, that's who he's thinking of.

And the godly life, he says, is found in Christ Jesus by believing into the Lord Jesus. By being united to the Lord Jesus by having a living relationship with the Lord Jesus. The godly life. Then he gives us the punch line, this life is marked by persecution. He stresses it, you see. All Christians, all who desire to live a godly life, all who desire to live a godly life will suffer persecution. That's what Jesus said. "You will be hated by all for my namesake." That's what he says in John's gospel, "If the world hates you, know that it hated me first before it hated you. If you're of the world, the world would love you as its own but because you are not of the world but I chose you out of the world, therefore, the world hates you. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. In this world you will have tribulation. These are the last days, days of difficulty for the people of God." And you know, that this hatred of the world is more or less intense depending on the time, the period of history, the moment of time in which we find ourselves.

For well over 100 years America has been known as a nation of people who have an impulse, a Christian impulse and this nation has been responsible under God for fueling the missionary effort of the world-wide church. But remember where you came from, many of you. Many of your forebears came from Europe. From Germany and the French Huguenots and Scotland, the Scots Irish and the Scots. They came here because they couldn't live there anymore. They couldn't worship in freedom there anymore. There were wars. There were assaults. There were tortures. Women were being tied to stakes and drowned because they were believing and covenanted believers.

That's what brought the people here, the very best people of Europe came here. I'm kind of a retard within this, the genes are really bad now over there. That's why they don't get their act together because all the good people came here. Although, that was a long time ago. Genes deteriorate very quickly. But that's the background of America, isn't it? There were those days that were great days, glory days. These are not those days. These are not those days.

There are movements and societies, the media, everywhere around us in which what we believed is parroted, misrepresented. The times have changed. We need a reality check. That is not to be thought unusual. It was the period before this that was unusual. This is normal Christian living. In this world, you will have persecution.

This past week the church of Scotland was meeting in Edinburgh and the church of Scotland is established by law and so at their general assembly usually the Queen's representative comes, the Queen has absolutely no input by the way, in this the Queen is just a titular figure, it's the government of the day that influences what the Lord High Commissioner says. And in his speech, he took a position, the church is divided over a particular issue at the moment, and the Lord High Commissioner in his speech took sides and he preached the doctrine of equality and he attacked those who disagreed with this government doctrine of equality as being intolerant, narrow minded, bigoted, on a level

with people who encourage slavery, racist. It was a vicious speech because the tide is out as far as Christianity is concerned.

And here we find ourselves today in modern day America and the wind is lashing in the face of Jesus Christ in America today. Paul when he'd been to these three cities in the book of Acts we're told that after he had been through this experience he went back to the same congregations and he taught those congregations that he'd been visiting in those three places that he mentions in our passage and strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith and said, "That through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

That's the day in which we live. And you notice what else is happening here in these days. Evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse. He's not just talking about society in general. I mean, there is no doubt an entropy in human behavior that leads people in a sense from living good lives to deteriorate. There is an evil impulse within humanity that is in a kind of cyclical way constantly reasserting itself. But here he is thinking about people in the church. He's thinking about those imposters or magicians, a word that is often translated magicians but I think he's thinking metaphorically here of these false teachers who were casting a spell on people as they gave their teaching. They'd been deceived by false teaching themselves and now they are going around deceiving other people. No other religion in the world has as many heresies as Christianity has. It's an amazing thing, isn't it?

About a third of the world's population are deceived by a Christian heresy called Islam. Because the gospel is always under assault from hell in these last day. These last days are characterized by false teaching. Paul says, "In these last days it matters what you expect because if you're not aware of this, if you haven't had this reality check, you will be destabilized in your faith.

But then he says, "In these last days it matters that we persevere." Now he says to Timothy, "This is what you did in the past. You received this truth, this teaching but you know, Timothy, what you need today is you need to continue down that path. You need to continue down that path. You need to keep going on. These false teachers, they've gone on and they've gone on into deception. You need to go on but you need to go on in the right direction, in the direction of truth. Remain, continue, go on, drive down the apostolic route building your life on the prophetic and apostolic word. Go down that road. Stick to that. Continue, persevere, keep going, keep keeping on."

That's the Apostle's great charge to the people of God today. It's a charge to us as a church, isn't it? It's all very well to look to our great past but frankly we're only as faithful as we are faithful today on this day to Christ and the gospel. It applies to us in our individual lives. I know some of you are going through the most astonishing crises at the moment. Some of you are experiencing events and circumstances in your own family life and in your own personal life that have shaken you to the very core, have left you gasping and wondering and questioning. And in such times, you know, the word to us all is to

keep going, to encourage each other. We need to be Pauls to the Timothys, we need to be told “keep going, keep keeping on, persevere, persevere.”

And all of us are responsible for the church, the wider church. Keep to the faith, keep to the faith, keep keeping to the faith. Don't abandon it. Don't be swept around with every wind of doctrine. Don't be pushed off your feet. Continue. Paul says to Timothy, “I want you to continue in what you've heard from me and I want you to continue in what you've heard from scripture. All scripture breathed of God.” We're not going to go down that route this morning, we'll come back to that next time, but that's what he's saying to him. This is how you keep going on. You keep resting in the apostolic and prophetic word. You keep resting on the apostolic and prophetic word that we, today, call our Bibles, the word of God. You keep building on that as your foundation. You keep holding to that truth. You keep your eyes on Jesus. You keep walking on the route that Jesus has laid out by his word. You keep persevering to the end.

We need to hear this because sadly many who once walked with us have left. The church I grew up in was a small church, perhaps about 300-400 people. At one stage, right about the stage that I was a teenager, about 12 of us decided or felt called into the ministry. I don't know how many left but I remember one of my close friends, I think I was the first that went and all of them followed, they just followed the leader, really. And I remember one of my close friends went to theological college and he was very keen. I think he was the best preacher of us all and he certainly had the best mind of us all on many levels. And I remember him saying to me after he had been to theological college and I came back to the church to preach, “I would give everything I have to believe as you believe.” He had abandoned orthodox Christian truth. Sadly, he didn't just abandon it and shut up, he abandoned it and kept talking and has infected others with his ideas. Persevere. You need to persevere in what you've been given. I think of a friend of mine, probably the best preacher that England produced in the last 25 years and I have no idea where he is today, neither does his wife or children. He abandoned the path.

Brothers and sisters, we are not safe until we're safely home. We're not safe until we're safely home. We need to be encouraging each other daily. Paul says to Timothy, “You received it well then, you need to continue on. Keep going. Keep persevering and think not til death to lay down that cross that you took up the day you followed Jesus. Think not til death to lay it down for only those who bear the cross will ever wear that glorious crown.”

Let's pray together.

Father God, we thank you that in your mercy you have called us into the company of your people here and around the world. Thank you for the fellowship, the communion of the saints. Thank you for the encouragement of one another here Sunday by Sunday as we study the word of God together. We hope that this morning, Lord, just by being here, by singing your praise, by reminding ourselves of who you are that we've been encouraging each other daily to keep keeping on. On this Pentecost Sunday, grant us

fresh supplies of the Holy Spirit. To keep our understanding clear of your holy word. And to keep us empowered to serve you. In Jesus' strong name, we pray. Amen.