

MONDAY, 5/15

Read 2 Timothy 3:1.

Paul opens chapter 3 with a shift. In chapter 2, he addressed the current pressures the early church was experiencing. In chapter 3, Paul turns his attention to the future troubles the church could expect to face. The church was navigating tough times, but they must expect things to get worse before they get better.

Paul speaks of "the last days," what we often consider an ominous term. Our minds often run over to Revelation and the end of this world. There isn't a need to go that far just yet. Let's look at how time is broken down in terms of salvation history.

In the redemptive narrative of scripture, time is divided by the events that marked a change in our relationship to God. It begins with Creation in Genesis 1-2, where we had perfect union with God. Genesis 3 notes a sizeable shift with the Fall, when mankind turned from God. Here, human nature is marred by sin and our need for salvation. Humanity is left to hope that God will do something to save us. This period lasts through the entire Old Testament. The next period is captured in the gospels. It is the period of redemption. Humanity's hopes are realized in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Through Him, it is now possible for God and humanity to be reconciled. This leads to the final period of time known as consummation. After His resurrection, Jesus ascended to be with His Father. We are now awaiting His return when Jesus will make all things new, and God and humanity will live in perfect union again.

Consummation is often referred to as the last days in the Bible. Jesus often used the term "the end of this age" to speak of the same. When you see those terms, they can refer to the very final days of this world, or they could refer generally to the time we are in as we are awaiting Jesus' return.

I bring this up because many Christians get caught up trying to predict the end of this age. For some, it causes angst, and for others, it can become a distraction to the call Jesus has given us. The point Paul, and even Jesus, make is for us to be prepared. We need to be aware that things will grow more challenging for those who follow Jesus. We must expect the world to move further away from God.

Now, how is it that we can be prepared for such times? It is to do the opposite of what the world is doing. Rather than moving further away from God, we must move closer to Him. We lean upon Him and one another for strength to endure. We take up His work of sharing the Good News of Jesus.

John Wesley was once asked about Christ's return and when it would happen. He didn't make a prediction. He simply said that when Jesus returns, Wesley hoped that Jesus would find him caught up doing His work. That is a great picture of what it means to be prepared.

Praying Together:

"God, prepare me for faithful service this day and every day that You give me on this earth. I leave any fears of the days ahead in Your hands. I trust that You are sufficient and that You will work through me as I give myself to You. Amen.

TUESDAY, 5/16

Read 2 Timothy 3:2-4.

Talk about some heavy verses. Ancient philosophical and religious literature often contained what they called “lists of vices”. Here, Paul offers such a list as marks of a world that has turned from the Lord and unto themselves.

If you were to sum up this list in one idea, it is that some people have become “lovers of themselves”. Their lives have become about serving themselves, their wants, and wishes. They pursue pleasure, power, and money because they believe that they are the keys to a life of meaning. The term “lovers” refers to those too intent on an object; in other words, you're placing too much hope on that object to bring you life. You're looking to the wrong things to save you.

Now, let's be honest with ourselves. It is all too easy in our culture to fall prey to such ideas. We've all chased after these things with the same hopes. Even so, there are times some of these temptations can slowly steal our focus. The scriptures are clear that life is found when God is our primary love. This is how we were designed to function. When we ascribe ultimate love to God, it sets every other love in its rightful place.

However, when other things become our chief love, it devastates the soul. Pastor Tim Keller said the irony is that when we love a thing more than God, we ruin it. His point was that when a spouse takes such a place in our hearts, we put crushing expectations on them. We expect them to love us perfectly so much so that we now have meaning to our life and feel the significance of our soul. Look, if you're married, your spouse can love and bless you, but God never meant for us to place this burden on them. Your spouse is human like you. If you're expecting them to be your savior, what happens when they fall short of your expectations? If you don't properly adjust your expectations, you will destroy the relationship you once put all your hope in. This is why it is so important for us to rightly order the loves of our heart. What's at stake if we do not properly order our loves is that our life will start to look more like this list.

Yet when we make God our chief love, He rightly orders our hearts. With our greatest affections and commitment given to Him, He becomes the source of our hope. He is able to make us feel our significance and give us true meaning and wholeness. This puts our soul at rest.

When our souls find respite in God, we are freed to engage in deeper relationships with others. We are empowered to love people fully even when they might disappoint us. With our deepest concerns having been satisfied by God, we find ourselves requiring less of them. This allows us to enjoy them and put more of ourselves into the relationship.

Praying Together:

“God, rightly order the loves of my life. I am prone to put my hope in things or people. While you have given me people to love, give me the grace to make You my chief love. I cast my hopes upon You, and in doing so, I am able to love others as I should. Amen.”

WEDNESDAY, 5/17

Read 2 Timothy 3:5.

As I read through our verses for the week, this one really caught my eye: “Having the form of godliness but denying its power.” What does Paul mean by that?

Paul's point is that human efforts to be good might look like godliness on the outside, but they lack the power to deal with the human problem, which is our heart. Let's take a deeper look at what I mean by that. Several years ago, a social influencer tried to launch a kindness campaign called “Just Be Kind”. The idea was to just be kind to everyone. Simple, right? It sounds that

way, but it is anything but simple because our tendency is to choose whom we want to be kind to. When we encounter someone who is difficult to exercise kindness toward, we either ignore them or neglect to show them kindness, easily justifying our reasons for why. Sure, we can keep up being nice to people for a while, but oftentimes we just return to our old patterns.

I realize that sounds a little pessimistic about the human condition, but that is the reality of the human condition. Kindness is a reflection of godliness, but if we want to unlock our capacity for kindness, we must have our hearts changed. If we do not, we will lack the power to live differently than before. We will just be trying to be better people by manipulating our natural behaviors, which is exhausting and unsustainable.

Only Christ has the power to transform the human heart. In Jesus, we can become a new creation with a new nature. Empowered by His grace at work within us, we can grow into His likeness. With His love shaping our hearts, kindness becomes who we are, not something we try to make ourselves do. These virtues become a part of our being, and our being is what influences our doing. Our actions are a reflection of what we are on the inside. Jesus is the only One who can change us on the inside—to alter our hearts. Only He has the power to make us what we ought to be.

This is really good news for us. In Jesus, we have One who can bring true change to our hearts. He is willing to transform any and all that come to Him in faith.

My prayer for us is that we offer ourselves to Him—that we trust in His power to give us new, transformed hearts so that our lives can become a reflection of Him. It is only when we invite His grace to work in our lives that we can become the kind of people who reflect the gospel. May it be true in us.

Praying Together:

“Lord, You alone have the power to give us new hearts. We pray that You would examine our hearts to see if there is anything that needs to be renewed by Your grace. We give ourselves to You so that You would continue to shape us. We need Your help and are confident that You are indeed eager to be our help. Amen.”

THURSDAY, 5/18

Read 2 Timothy 3:6-9.

These verses are a reminder of how important it is to understand context. Without the proper context, when we read passages like this, we scratch our heads and just move on.

Paul is warning Timothy not to fall prey to the people whose lives do not reflect their teaching. In verse 5, he said, “Have nothing to do with such people.” Why must he avoid these people? The reason is that they weasel their way into people’s lives and lead them into beliefs that aren’t life-giving.

Paul uses the example of teachers who influenced women in their homes. These are likely teachers not welcome at synagogue, so they went to homes where women were. It was much more common in that time for women rather than men to switch religions. Men were given greater access to the religious community than women. They had more opportunities to learn and be connected. Women were more on the periphery of the religious community than men. The early church broke down these barriers, allowing women greater access to the community than did the Jewish and even Greek traditions.

Paul states that such teachers do not have people's best interests at heart. He compares them to Jannes and Jambres, whom Jewish tradition names as Pharaoh's magicians in Exodus 7. His point is that they deceived people. Moses revealed God's true power, yet these magicians recreated some of his miracles, thus leading some people to trust in Egypt's gods. This ultimately led to the downfall of the people. We must always be cautious about what we allow to influence our beliefs.

One of the overarching points Paul is making in verses 1-9 is that we are all being shaped by something. The question is this: what are we allowing to shape us? What teachers or ideas are we allowing to mold our beliefs, and what do those beliefs ultimately produce?

We have access to nearly unlimited information. There are countless ideas floating around out there. We would be wise to test those ideas and those who propose them before we adopt them. So, what and who get your attention? What teachers do you allow to shape your thoughts and beliefs?

I ask that knowing full well that if you're reading this, then you have allowed us as your pastors to have some level of influence on your faith. That is both a privilege and a responsibility we take very seriously. I'm always mindful of the warning in James 3:1 that says teachers will be judged more strictly. In our teaching and preaching, our aim is to "correctly handle the word of truth" as Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:15. We hope to instruct and build up the church. That being said, we're fallible. Neither of us has arrived. We're learning, and that's why it's important for the church to hold everything up against God's Word, even what your pastors say.

Praying Together:

"Father, I want to be transformed by the renewing of my mind. I want my thoughts and beliefs to be shaped by You and what is true. Expose any beliefs in me that are not of You. Rid my mind of any ideas that do not produce Jesus' character and His self-emptying love in my life. Amen."

FRIDAY, 5/19

Read 2 Timothy 3:10-11.

Yesterday, we looked at verses 6-9, in which Paul warned us about being deceived. It is easier to be duped than we might think. The real problem is that it's hard to know when it's happening. In the following verses, Paul will tell us how to prevent ourselves from being deceived.

Paul says that we must always hold what we hear up against the witness of the teacher's life and the scriptures. We'll cover the scriptures tomorrow. Let's look at how Paul's example gave Timothy reason to trust his teachings.

Paul says to check his teachings and beliefs against his life. Paul's very way of life was a testament to the truth of the gospel and everything he said. Just a glance through Paul's life and it becomes clear that he staked his entire life on the hope of the gospel. He spent himself as a servant to Jesus, even enduring terrible hardship for Jesus' sake. If Paul were presenting himself as something he wasn't, that would have been exposed in the midst of his trials.

Acts 13-14 tell of Paul's experiences on his first missionary journey. In Antioch, Paul was rejected. In Iconium, he was threatened, and in Lystra, he was nearly stoned to death. He brings this up to point to his faithfulness and endurance in the face of extreme hardships. In Paul's mind, this was tangible evidence that proved that he was genuine in what he believed and taught.

Of course, these experiences weren't just proof of Paul's faithfulness to God, but also of God's faithfulness to Paul. In each of these circumstances, as difficult as they must have been, God delivered Paul from further harm. He discovered that Jesus' grace was sufficient for any and every challenge. It reminds me of the promise of Jesus at the end of the Great Commission in Matthew 28. After charging His followers to go out into the world to make disciples, Jesus promises to be with us always "to the very end of this age." In other words, until Jesus returns to complete His promise to make all things new, He will be present with us as we go about His work.

Paul is a great example to us today. When we think of Jesus' call to make disciples and reach people, we know that we need God's grace to strengthen us. We need the Spirit's help to guide us. We need the scriptures to help shape our minds and character so that we're ready for service. Trusting in God's provision, Paul made use of all of these. He did not fear stepping into God's mission even when it brought hardships. If we want to be a church that reaches people for Christ, we must be willing to step out in faith under God's leadership. We must embrace both the joys from the victories that God wins as well as the painful costs of following Him.

Praying Together:

"Jesus, we need Your help. We want our lives to be a reflection of what we believe about You. Fill us with Your love. Help us to do Your will and to trust You with the results. Help us be willing to take whatever may come from our being faithful to You, whether it brings joy or pain. For even when we suffer for You, we are really suffering with You. Amen."

SATURDAY, 5/20

Read 2 Timothy 3:12-13.

There it is again. It keeps popping up throughout 2 Timothy. It is the warning that following Jesus will lead to suffering.

Verse 12 says, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." During our recent True North weekend, Dr. Dave Smith mentioned that a part of him was reluctant when studying 2 Timothy for this reason. He said he didn't like hearing Paul say that suffering comes with following Jesus.

I don't think any of us like hearing that. We like the blessing that accompanies the gospel. We're not so sure about the suffering part. Actually, we are sure about the suffering part--we're sure we don't want it. Regardless of how much we may not want suffering, it is a reality when we follow Jesus. That will become more evident as we move closer to Jesus' second coming. As this age progresses on, so too will the hardships for God's people.

As difficult as suffering might be, it's better than the alternative. Paul says we can either embrace suffering for Jesus or "go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived".

Now, I realize this has not been the most hopeful of devotionals thus far. You were probably hoping for some good news on a Saturday. Let me end with the good news then. Part of Paul's hope as he faced beatings, imprisonment, and suffering was that no matter what happened to him here on this earth, Jesus would ultimately vindicate him.

In his prayer in Galatians 1, Paul praises Jesus who gave Himself for our sins "to rescue us from this present age." He knows that Jesus has won a new life for him, a life that might be veiled from him now, but will be fully his when he goes to be with Jesus. Paul knows that Jesus has won the

victory, and that in the end, his suffering will be forgotten. There will be only joy in Christ's presence.

Praying Together:

"Holy Spirit, we call upon You to be a source of strength and encouragement as we walk through this life. We want to live lives of service to Jesus. We want our lives to reflect Jesus, even if it means enduring hardships for Him. Give us courage to be faithful no matter the cost, for final victory is our story because of Christ. Amen."

SUNDAY, 5/21

Read 2 Timothy 3:14-15.

The letter of 2 Timothy reads as a mentor writing to his student. There are moments where it is clear that the relationship between Paul and Timothy runs much deeper than that. This is one of those times. This feels like Paul is more of a spiritual father to young Timothy. "But as for you," Paul begins, "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it."

At a previous church, I remember a father who called on a number of men in the church to come celebrate his son's fifteenth birthday. He wanted men his son knew and respected to speak into his life as he took another important step into manhood. This was the verse his dad shared over his son.

He shared those words over his son for the same reason Paul did over Timothy. He wanted his son to hold fast to what he knew to be true. He had been reared to understand who Jesus is and who he is to Jesus. The father knew that this world will steal that understanding from you if you aren't careful, so he pled with his son to hold on tight to what is true.

Timothy had also been raised up in the faith. His grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice modeled a life of faith in Jesus. Paul exhorted Timothy to not forget them and to remember the life their faith produced. That is the life of abundance.

Paul also encourages Timothy to cling to the scriptures. God's Word is the anchor for our souls in a tumultuous world. It grounds us in who God is and also who we are. Even when the times and ideas shift, God's Word remains steadfast. It's testimony of Jesus' love and the salvation that comes through Him that never changes. The scriptures are able to make us "wise for salvation"; it reveals the One who is able to give us salvation in Christ. The Word tells us that salvation comes when we put our hope and faith in Jesus.

Praying Together:

"Lord, I thank You for those who have shown me what the life of faith looks like. I am grateful for the gift of Your Word that is a lamp unto my feet and a light for the paths I walk. Give me the grace to grow into the fullness of my salvation, for You are the Giver of life. Amen."