

2 Timothy 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 April 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] 2 Timothy chapter 3 But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty, for people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.

Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins, and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

Just as Janes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also opposed the truth. Men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith, but they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.

You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra, which persecutions I endured, yet from them all the Lord rescued me.

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

[1 : 3 4] But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is breathed out by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

In 2 Timothy chapter 2, Paul had instructed Timothy concerning how he should address the problem of the false teachers. Now, in chapter 3, he presents the false teachers within an eschatological framework.

They are living in the last days. The old covenant is about to come down in a few years' time, with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and in this time between the times, introduced by Christ's death, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost, the world order is being radically shaken.

And the shaking is increasing as they reach the end of this period, especially around the time that this letter is written, in the 60s AD. Teaching concerning false teachers, in such an eschatological framework, is something that we see on a number of occasions within the New Testament, in places like 2 Peter and Jude, for instance.

[2 : 5 1] Also, in 1 Timothy chapter 4, verses 1-3, Paul had made a similar point. Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times, some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus had made similar claims. Matthew chapter 24, verses 9-13, Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake.

And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another, and many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold, but the one who endures to the end will be saved.

In this epistle we get a sense of Paul's own experience bearing this out. He's been abandoned by a great many in Asia, and in the following chapter we read of people like Demas, whose faith has been abandoned for the sake of the world.

As the eschatological horizon approaches, it is clear that they are living in perilous times. Wickedness has a freer reign, and is expressing itself in more intense forms. Paul provides a lengthy vice list, characterising some of the people that are arising in these times.

[4 : 14] We might compare such a list to that which we find in Romans chapter 1, verses 29 to 31. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

As in Romans chapter 1, the list here plays with particular sounds, from disobedient to parents, to not loving good. All of the words begin with the letter alpha, save for the term slanderous.

As a list, it moves smoothly from the tongue, and lodges in the ear. The characterisation begins with the disordered loves of these people. They love self and money. As Paul had noted in 1 Timothy chapter 6, the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.

From their disordered loves, Paul proceeds to their pride and boastfulness. From these traits, a torrent of sinful behaviour flows forth. In the list that Paul gives, we get a sense that these people are characterised by virtually every single kind of sin.

[5 : 23] They are cruel and implacable. They are opposed to reconciliation. They slander. They cannot control themselves and are like brute beasts. They have no love for what is good. They are impulsive and impetuous.

They betray those that would rely upon them. They are self-important, filled with ungodliness, and utterly devoid of the gratitude that should be a distinguishing feature of the people of God.

Verse 4 concludes by characterising them as lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, perhaps hearkening back to the beginning of the list in verse 2, where they are described as lovers of self.

Surprisingly, at the beginning of verse 5, they are described as having the appearance of godliness. Despite all of these vices, these persons are maintaining a facade of righteousness, and many around them seem to be taken in by them.

Timothy, however, needs to recognise such people. He needs to have a sense of where they fit in to the eschatological framework, and he needs to be careful to avoid them. The last days are a time of great testing.

[6 : 21] In the times of testing, the hearts of people can be revealed, and the false teachers and their teaching are one form that this testing can take. These false teachers, Timothy's opponents, seem to be having success in certain contexts, particularly with some foolish and spiritually compromised women.

We might get a sense of the dynamics by which such false teaching spread in other parts of the pastoral epistles. In Titus chapter 1 verse 11, they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.

The false teachers, like the serpent with Eve, seem to be focusing upon uninformed women as the weakest link. Through leading astray such women, the women spread the false teaching, and whole communities can become compromised.

Perhaps such a spread of the false teaching is also seen in a place like 1 Timothy chapter 5 verse 13. Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not.

The women described here are burdened with sins and led astray by various passions. In Paul's understanding, it is their sinfulness that makes them susceptible to the false teaching.

[7 : 33] Perhaps what they are looking for is teaching that flatters their desires, and the false teachers, as they are doing this for money, are only too happy to flatter the desires of their hearers. They will likely be paid far more handsomely as a result.

There will always be a market for teachers who tickle their hearers' ears. However, such women are doomed to futility in their quest for the truth, as they have no appetite for the truth. Their appetites lead them astray, moving them away from the truth, rather than closer toward it.

Likewise, if they are seeking to learn from these false teachers, they are doomed to continued and increasing ignorance. The false teachers have nothing true to share with them. Indeed, further time spent at their feet will only result in the hearers taking on some of the manifold vices of the teachers.

Paul compares these false teachers to Jannes and Jambres, names that the tradition had given to key magicians that had stood against Moses and Aaron from Pharaoh's court. Just as the magicians had not stood long or successfully against Moses and Aaron, so these teachers will be shown up, revealed in their true character.

It will only be a matter of time before their folly is revealed to everyone. In contrast to such false teachers, infected as they are with many vices, Timothy needs to devote himself to a very different pattern of behaviour, and he will learn that pattern from Paul.

[8 : 51] Paul lists a number of different ways in which he provides an example. In his teaching, he provides a model of setting forth the truth, forthrightly, powerfully, with integrity and with clarity.

Paul's behaviour, his commitment and his devotion in his life. His Christian virtues of faith, patience, love and steadfastness, all provide patterns for Timothy.

Paul has described Timothy as his son in the faith. As a son, Timothy is to follow the pattern of his father. In 1 Corinthians 4, verse 17, we see Timothy described in a way that suggests that he has done this.

That is why I sent you, Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere, in every church. In verses 11 and 12, we see that Paul especially wants to spotlight persecutions and sufferings.

Suffering has been a continued theme within the second epistle to Timothy. We see it in chapter 1, verses 11 and 12. Also in chapter 2, verse 3, In verses 8 to 10 of that chapter, Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal, but the word of God is not bound.

[10 : 24] Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. Timothy was already well aware of Paul's sufferings.

As Paul mentions here, Timothy had followed them. He had met Paul during the second missionary journey at Lystra and Iconium, which helps to explain why Paul mentions the suffering that he experienced in those places here.

Such suffering is what should be expected by all those who follow Christ. The world, the flesh, and the devil are set against them, and they will have to struggle against all of these forces. There is an antagonism between light and darkness, between this age and the age to come.

At the end of verse 11, Paul might be alluding to Psalm 34, verses 17 to 19. When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their trouble.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all. Paul warns Timothy that the evils and the opposition that they face will only increase as the eschatological horizon nears.

[11 : 30] They are living in the last days, and as a result, they should not be surprised to find lawlessness abounding. In such a situation, Timothy needs to dig in. He needs to re-entrench himself within the things that he already knows.

He needs to remind himself of the old lessons, and he needs to draw from his deepest roots. He was taught in the Christian faith by his mother and his grandmother, keeping them in mind, and the example of the apostle who had been like a father to him.

He must steel himself for the coming struggle. As Paul is seeing so many people falling away, being picked off, or otherwise failing in this hour of crisis, he is concerned to encourage Timothy to exercise boldness as he faces the future.

Now is the time when Timothy's true mettle will be proved. The apostle especially singles out the scriptures as that which Timothy must ground himself in. Timothy has learned the scriptures, the Old Testament scriptures, from his early childhood, and it is these scriptures that prepare one to exercise faith in Christ.

In a theologically important statement, Paul expresses the usefulness of the scriptures for Timothy's task. The scriptures are described as breathed out by God, all one word in the Greek.

[12 : 41] This is why we talk about inspiration. The concept here also connects the scriptures closely with the Holy Spirit. 2 Peter chapter 1 verse 21 expresses a similar point.

For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. The meaning of the statement is not entirely clear. It could be read all scripture, referring to the whole body of the scriptures, or it could be read as every scripture, each individual text or passage.

Scholars also debate whether we should understand it as saying that every scripture is inspired by God and useful, or that every scripture that is inspired by God is also useful. It seems to me that on balance, it is more likely that we should understand this as every scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

The reference is not to scripture as a whole body. The scriptures were spoken of in the preceding verse in a plural form. Here it's singular, which suggests to me that it's more likely to be referring to individual scriptures.

Each and every scripture is inspired, and therefore profitable. And each inspired scripture, and the inspired scriptures as a whole, prepare the man of God, the Christian minister, for all the work that he needs to do, for teaching the task of elucidating the truth and instruction within it, for reproof, for addressing the false teachers and opponents, for correction, for exposing and revealing their errors, and for training in righteousness.

[14 : 10] Besides the inspiration of scripture, a further thing that the final verses of this chapter bring out is the sufficiency of the scripture. It is the scripture that enables the man of God to be complete and to be equipped for every good work.

In the scripture, all the instruction that we need to serve God faithfully has been given to us. A question to consider. What other statements in scripture can help us in developing a doctrine of scripture?

Thank you.