

2 Timothy 3:1-15

Introduction

This passage needs to be treated as a whole, and yet there is a great deal in it about the characteristics of the last days, and Paul's example. To comment on each detail could cause confusion. We are going to consider the term "the Last Days", review the characteristics of those last days, and comment on how the Christian should live in those last days.

The term "the last days"

It is usually assumed that "the last days" are the period of moral decline and descent into anarchy immediately before the Second Coming. That may be the meaning in some references (e.g. 1 Peter 1:5), but that does not make sense here, or in some of the other places where the term occurs. Timothy is being told here how to behave in "the last days". But he is long since dead, and 1900 years have elapsed, and Christ has still not come. Paul obviously means his teaching to be followed by Timothy.

The other problem in interpreting "the last days" to just mean the days that immediately precede Christ's return is that we do not know when Christ will return, so we are not certain if we are living in the last days.

The answer is found in the Bible. In the majority of cases where the term is used, "the last days" must refer to the period which began with Christ's first coming and will end with His second coming. Preliminary revelation was in the Old Testament, and then "the last days" came with Christ. **'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.'** (Acts 2:19, Peter quoting from Joel 2:28-32). The Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, 1900 years ago, so we are in the last days. **In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe** (Hebrews 1:1,2).

Hence we are living in "the last days". The Old Testament period has ended, and a new age has come, "the last days", and they began with the coming of Christ as a baby to Bethlehem. Hence, the characteristics Paul describes in this chapter are of the whole period between the First and Second Comings. The teaching suits Timothy, and the many generations since. We can apply this teaching to ourselves, even though we do not know when Christ is going to come.

The last days are times of great evil and stress, and this will be especially severe immediately before Christ's coming, when the man of lawlessness will be revealed (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12). Evil will reach a climax then, but it has been present throughout the last days. So 2 Timothy ch.3 is talking about the present, and the instructions Paul gives are for us today. Do not be surprised. Do not get rattled. Do not lose nerve. Do not think things are out of God's control. God is not taken by surprise, and neither should we. Here is how to face and deal with the situation.

The characteristics of the last days

Nineteen words are used in verses 2-4 to describe the wicked men responsible for times of stress and difficulty through which we pass. The list starts with **lovers of themselves** and ends with **rather than lovers of God**. This sums up the heart of the matter. All the other things listed in between result from men loving themselves rather than God. This is a fundamental explanation of what goes on in private lives, families, societies, nations, and in the whole world. The root of it all is godless self-centredness.

God's order is that we love God first, then others second, and self last. Man's order is to love self first, others second, and lastly God. God's order is necessary for a perfect world. Man's order has produced chaos and evil on every hand. As we look down the list, recall what you have seen on TV, read in the papers, people you have met, national figures and politicians – it will all sound very familiar.

Lovers of themselves. Self on the throne, Christ in the Cross. All that matters is number one.

Lovers of money. Covetous, materialistic, money and possessions are all that matters.
Boastful. Braggarts who know all, and swagger and strut through life, claiming they have the answers to everything.

Proud. Contemptuous of everyone else, total disdain.

Blasphemers (A.V.), **abusive** (N.I.V.). Insult God and insult man. Rude and obscene. Whenever they speak, someone gets hurt.

Disobedient to their parents. They owe their parents a debt they can never repay, and yet they treat them like dirt.

Ungrateful. Taking everything for granted, please and thank you rarely on their lips. As for God, they would never dream of acknowledging Him as the giver of all good things.

Unholy. They offend against the very decencies of life. They are shameless, pursuing pleasures that would be shameful even to name.

Without love (N.I.V.), **Without natural affection** (A.V.). Even the closest ties mean nothing to them.

Unforgiving (N.I.V.), **Trucebreakers** (A.V.). Full of bitterness, breaking agreements solemnly entered. Could be referred to marriage or industrial agreements.

Slanders. They ruin people's good name without finding out if there is truth in what they are repeating.

Without self-control. Slaves to passion and lust, unable to control their instincts.

Brutal. Like untamed animals, having no pity or no sympathy.

Not lovers of the good. They ridicule and abuse people who are concerned with honesty, purity and truth.

Treacherous. They let people down, and betray their best friends if it suits their cause.

Rash. Reckless, impulsive, acting first before they think. They cannot be advised because they think they know it all.

Conceited. High-minded and swollen-headed, bumptious, inflated with a sense of their own importance.

Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. Self comes first, and God comes last.

Consider this list. We all know people like this. There were never more than at present. This is a very contemporary list describing mankind as we know it. Only the Gospel offers a radical solution to those who put self first and God last. Only the Gospel offers new birth, and a new creation. Only the Gospel turns men inside out, making them God-centred and not self-centred. How up to date the Gospel is. How urgently it is needed today.

The description in verses 2-4 speaks of men's moral conduct. The last days will also be characterized by the religious beliefs held. They will not necessarily be days without religion. Men can refuse to love God, yet still love religion. Religion and morality are often divorced. Consider the protests of prophets like Amos, Hosea and Isaiah, telling the people how, despite their prayers, services, sacrifices and festivals, they were liars, adulterers, robbers and oppressors. Jesus told the Pharisees that they could cleanse the outside of the cup, but inwardly they were full of extortion and greed.

Plenty of people have an outward form of religion, but they know nothing of its power because there is no inward reality, no influence on their lives, no life-changing power. There are many sad examples of "religious" people whose lives are exposed as immoral and dishonest. **Have nothing to do with them** (2 Timothy 3:5), Paul warns.

In the last days, these evil but religious people will be extremely zealous in winning others, anxious to propagate their beliefs and practices, energetically trying to make others like them. **They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women** (2 Timothy 3:6). They use back door entry – spreading heresy among the vulnerable when they know it is safe to do so. They prey on people who have no grasp of the truth, and who succumb to flattery, believing anything. Jannes and Jambres (v7) were names in Jewish legend, two chief magicians in Pharaoh's court who opposed Moses (Exodus 7:10). But they did not get very far. They went from bad to worse, but their success was limited.

Often we are distressed by false teachers who oppose the truth, and trouble the church. They use sly and slippery methods to beguile the weak and gullible. They may know popularity for a while, but the clear lesson from history is that truth in the end wins through. Many heresies down the years are of antiquarian interest only. God preserves and revives the truth.

Here is a picture of perilous times. Evil seems to be in the ascendant. People throw off all restraint and live for themselves. The zeal shown by false teachers in trying to win others is tireless, but the religion they profess is powerless.

This raises several questions. How are God's people to behave? What should their response be? Will they give in to pressure? Will they go with the tide and give up the faith? Are they to assume God has forgotten them?

How Christians are to live in the last days

In face of moral decline, empty show of religion, the spread of false teaching, Paul gives clear instruction about the steps we are to take. The essence of the attitude we

must take is that we are called to be different, so we must stand firm, prepared to stand alone if necessary, and not give in. Whatever pressures and attacks we are under, we are not to be reeds shaken by the wind, but like immovable rocks, unaffected by the mountain torrent surging all around.

We must learn from the witness of older and more mature Christians. Timothy is commended because he carefully followed Paul's teaching, way of life, purpose in life, faithfulness, patience and endurance, especially under persecution and suffering. Timothy, who was a native of Lystra, would have seen what happened to Paul in Antioch, where he was driven out (Acts 13:50), and Iconium where he was almost lynched (Acts 14:5,6), and Lystra where he was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19). Timothy would have seen how the Lord had delivered Paul from all these predicaments. Paul had lived a different kind of life. He clearly loved God and not self, and was prepared to suffer for his convictions. Timothy had seen the living proof of the power of the Gospel, and had already followed Paul's example.

While we must only speak of Christ as our Master, there is much to be learned from watching older Christians and of reading biographies of those who have gone before. We can look back on those who have lived for Christ and who were an inspiration and example to us – parents, Sunday School teachers. They may have had a difficult passage, but they won through, never yielding, firm as a rock. We owe a lot to them, and if, by God's grace, they conquered, then so can we.

Secondly Paul teaches us to be prepared for trouble. **Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted** (2 Timothy 3:12). We are swimming against the stream when we put God first, because the world puts self first. We are not going to get any bouquets or votes of thanks for exposing the wayward lifestyle of the world. **I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also** (John 15:19,20). To be forewarned is to be forearmed. The truth is that more blood has been shed for Christ in this century than in any other.

Paul's final instruction to Timothy on how to live in these last days is: **continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of** (2 Timothy 3:14). He had had a good grounding. Excellent foundations had been laid. He owed much to Paul, Lois and Eunice. He had been taught the Scriptures since he was a baby. It is a privilege and wonderful start in life to have Christian parents. That early training is never wasted, and its value is seen especially after conversion.

And we have more than even Timothy had – not just the teachings of Paul, but the entire New Testament. We must abide in these things, not neglect or squander them. We are responsible for building on the foundations laid. Heresies come and go, fashions in behaviour vary from generations to generation, but we are to be that fixed unmoving boulder, unaffected by changing times.

William Gladstone spoke of "clinging to the impregnable rock of the Holy Scripture". It is the only worthwhile foundation for any ministry, the only solid rock for belief and conduct, the only source of comfort and support in times of need and affliction. If we neglect God's Word we will never be established in the truth, and will never have assurance or be confident of our own standing. We will make many mistakes in life,

in our families and in our work. We will be easily misled by error and false teaching, tossed to and fro like a cork on the waves. **Let the word of God dwell in you richly** (Colossians 3:15).

Read the Bible every day. Yesterday's bread will not do for today. Read with childlike humility, asking God to speak to you as you listen. Read it in a spirit of obedience, applying it to yourself; determine to be doer of the word, not just a hearer.