

THE TIMES OF TERROR

II Timothy 3:1-4:5

David H. Roper

I am sure you know that these are Paul's last words -- the last, at least, to survive. They were written weeks or perhaps days before his martyrdom. Tradition tells us that he was beheaded in approximately 67 A.D., on the Ostian Way. For thirty years without intermissions he had been a faithful itinerant ambassador of Jesus Christ. He says in chapter 4 that he had fought the good fight against the enemies of the gospel, he had finished the race, i.e., he had completed the apostolic mission that the Lord had given to him, and he had kept the faith -- he had guarded the deposit. And now he is looking forward to the crown of righteousness which the Lord would grant to him and to all those who love His appearing. So this word from this book is his legacy to the church, his last will and testament and as someone has said, "Last words are always lasting words."

There is something I think very stirring about this final scene. The Apostle is imprisoned in his tiny cell. There is no window in the cell -- just a tiny hole in the ceiling for light and ventilation. And yet as we study this book, we can sense that the Apostle himself does not feel that he is imprisoned. As John R. W. Stott says, "His spirit soared through the tiny hole in the ceiling of his prison. His vision encompasses the whole world and embraces twenty centuries." It is true that the gospel has been borne around the world by the church on the strength of these principles Paul outlines in this little book.

We will start reading at chapter 3. Paul writes,

"But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of stress. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God [as contemporary as our morning newspapers--a very apt portrayal, I think, of what we call today "the permissive society"], holding the form of religion but denying the power of it. Avoid such people. For among them are those who make their way into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and swayed by various impulses, who will listen to anybody and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth. As Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men of corrupt mind and counterfeit faith; but they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men."

He begins by unfolding the characteristics of the age in which Timothy is to minister. There are several things that Paul wants Timothy to understand. The first is that these seasons of stress take place during a period which he designates as the *last days*. I think it is natural to apply these days to a future era, but the way in which the writers of the New Testament use this expression forbids this. When they talk about the last days, they are talking primarily about the inter-advent period between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ in which you and I are called to minister. The last days began with the first coming of Christ, and they will continue until he comes again. Perhaps the most conclusive statement in this regard is found in Hebrews 1:1, where the writer says,

"In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son . . ."

So when Paul refers to the last days, he is not referring to a future time but rather to the present period, the period in which Timothy was called upon to minister, and the period in which you and I are called upon to minister.

Secondly, these last days are called *times of stress*. The Greek word here translated "stress" literally means "hard" times, times that are difficult to bear, times that are hard to deal with, menacing times. This word is used in the eighth chapter of Matthew in the story of the demon-possessed man whom, Matthew said, no one could control. He was so "fierce" that no one could pass that way. This is the word, "fierce" times. And this will be the characteristic of the days in which we are called upon to minister. It is, I think, an apt description of the times in which we live.

Third, these are called times of stress because of the character of men. Notice verse 2. It will be *men* who will be lovers of self, etc. Men will be responsible for these menacing times -- fallen, evil, self-centered men who are hostile to God.

These then are the three things that set the context for the chapter. First, we are living in an era designated as the last days: Christ ushered them in. Two, we ought to realize that these are perilous days, days of stress, and therefore we should not be surprised when we become distressed. And third, these days are perilous because there is something remarkably wrong with men. Man is not the solution to the problem; he himself is the problem. The world is the way it is today because men are the way they are. In the immortal words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Therefore we ought to know these things and we should not be surprised because the world is going stark, raving mad. These are the days in which we are called to minister, and it is an apt characterization of them.

This first paragraph which we have just read is essentially a description of the men who are responsible for the times of terror. Verses 2 through 4 describe their moral conduct. Verse 5 is a word about their religious beliefs -- because evil men are often religious. Verses 6 and 7 give their method of propagating their beliefs. Verse 8 is a comparison between these false prophets and two Old Testament false prophets, Jannes and Jambres. Verse 9 is their ultimate disposition.

First, their moral conduct, verses 2 through 4. Paul gives this rather lengthy catalog of eighteen characteristics. We will not have time this morning to analyze them separately but it is important to notice the first and last characteristics because they bracket the list. Paul says that men will be *lovers of self* rather than *lovers of God*. This defines the problem: they are guilty of a misdirected love. They love self rather than God. The rest of this list is simply a description of the breakdown of the relationships between men because of this misdirected love. When men love self, money, pleasure, instead of God, relationships with other humans are always disrupted. As someone has said, "We are called upon to love God first, neighbors second, and self last. And when we reverse this order and love our selves first, it is our *neighbor* who always suffers." Therefore, Paul says, all antisocial behavior -- the absence of gentleness and mercy and concern for other individuals -- is a consequence of godless self-centeredness. There is simply no other explanation for the state of the world today.

Let us look at this list of characteristics again. I am not concerned so much that you get the details -- just the overall impression. Paul says that men will be lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, (all seem to be an

enlargement on the idea of self love) disobedient to parents (minor children are supposed to be obedient to parents and honor them but here is a class of individuals who have no regard whatever for their parents), ungrateful (they are unthankful), unholy (devoid of respect for human rights), inhuman (lacking in the normal human affections, heartless), implacable (they are irreconcilable, they will not negotiate, they rebuff every attempt at reconciliation).

I was talking last week with a Campus Crusade staff man from Portland State. He told me that the SDS Chapter on that campus has declared it will close the campus down before it opens this year. They have issued eight demands, four of which are against the Oregon State laws. There is simply nothing the administration can do. These students will not negotiate. They are implacable, irreconcilable. They are bent on destroying that campus. We are seeing it across the country today.

They are slanderers (i.e., the sin of stabbing people in the back), profligates (utterly without self-control), fierce (savage, brutal, hostile, violent), haters of good, reckless in word and deed, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. And that is the primary teaching of this passage. Men are the way they are because they love self rather than God. When men turn their back on God we can expect a decline in obedience and gratitude and respect and reasonableness, and there will be, as Paul predicts, perilous times. We are experiencing them.

That is why the gospel is so important, because it is only the gospel that effects a solution. It is only the gospel that can change men and make new creatures of them. If God is in their life, then they love the world as he loves it, and will *want* to serve, not exploit, their neighbor. But if they love self rather than God, then the result is always the disruption of human relationships, and the world begins to decay.

Now in verse 5 Paul says a word about their religion. They hold a form of religion but deny the power of it. They lack common decency yet they are religious men. This should not surprise us because it has been this way from the very beginning. whenever men deny the power of true religion, they are incapable of change, of changing themselves or of changing others. As Paul says, the power of true religion is the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is why Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation." It is the only thing that can ultimately change lives. Apart from the gospel religious people have no power to change and become moral; they only become stuffy, hypocritical, hung-up religious phonies.

In verse 6 and 7 he gives us a description of their *methods*. They not only practice a denial of the gospel but they propagate it. Paul says they make their way into houses. The Greek word literally means, "to *creep* into houses." They are religious creeps who prey on a certain class of women. He is not saying that all women are like this. But some women are intellectually weak and naive, mentally unstable and gullible, and burdened by sins. These men choose a time when their husbands are away at work and they prey on these women, a method that is as old as the Fall itself. They were making their way into the church in Timothy's time. And they are making their way into the church today, preying on those who do not have a foundation, who do not know the word of God and have not learned of the freedom and the cleansing that is in Christ.

In verse 8 he compares the tactics of these false teachers with those of the two magicians who opposed Moses. The names of the two court magicians, Jannes and Jambres, are not recorded in the Old Testament scriptures, but Jewish tradition gives them these names. He says, "Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed the truth, so these men also oppose the truth of the gospel. And just as Jannes and Jambres' folly became apparent, so will theirs. They will not get far." This is the promise that though, as he said earlier, their teaching will spread like gangrene

for a while, the acceptance and success of their ministry is temporary. They will not get far.

This is a great word of encouragement, I think, for today. We get distressed about false teachers in the church. They appear to be making great inroads. Men are responding, and we get distressed about their sly methods. But we have no reason to be fearful. Paul says there is something obviously erroneous about false teachers; religious error simply does not have the ring of truth, and they will not get very far. Their folly will be plain to all. I think this is essentially a restatement of verse 19 of chapter 2, where Paul says that false teachers are upsetting the faith of some, but Timothy must remember that God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." Those that are called into a relationship with God will recognize religious error and they will turn from it.

This is the character of these men and their ultimate end, and Paul utterly rejects them. They are men of corrupt mind and counterfeit faith, and he charges Timothy to avoid them. Not to avoid them because they are sinners, because we are never to avoid sinners. Jesus was the friend of sinners, and they are to be our friends as well. But we are to avoid religious phonies, those who propagate false teaching and thus corrupt the morals of others. Paul says, "avoid them!"

This then is a portrayal of the last days. They are characterized by religious apostasy, moral defection, and deviation from all Christian standards of truth. Now how should we as believers react in an age like this? Paul tells us in the verses from chapter 3, verse 10, on through to chapter 4, verse 5.

"Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions, my sufferings, what befell me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra, what 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 men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived [they will not only deceive others, they will believe their own lies]. 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 instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired 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.

"I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

Now let us get the argument straight in our minds. Paul says to Timothy that he is called upon to minister in perilous times, as we are. Men will grow increasingly evil both outside and within the church. The world will go to the dogs. But you, Timothy, you are to stand fast. You are to be different. Notice the personal pronouns. First in verse 10 of chapter 3, in contrast to Jannes and Jambres, "*you* have observed my teaching." In verse 14, "but as for *you*, continue in what you have learned," in contrast to those evil men and impostors who will go from bad to worse. And in chapter 4, verse 1, "I charge *you* in the presence of God." And in verse 5, "As for you," in contrast to those who are turning away from listening to the truth and wandering into myths. You Timothy, in contrast to the rest of the world, if need be, you are to resist the current. You are to stand fast. You are to stand apart and you are to stand firm. You are not to catch the infection that is sweeping the world; you are to be different.

I think this is the message of this entire chapter. Christians are called upon to be different. We are not to be washed away by the flood of evil; we are to be nonconformists. We are not shy animals who have to adopt protective covering in order to blend into the landscape. We do not have to conform, or hibernate. There is an alternative to conformity and withdrawal: we are to stand fast. There are two verbs that carry out the substance of this charge. The first is found in verse 14 of chapter 3, "But as for you, *continue* in what you have learned . . . " It is the same word that Jesus uses in John 15 when he talks about his relationship with the branches. The branch is to abide (or continue) in the vine. We are to abide, to *continue*, we are to stand fast in what we have learned. That is the first thing we are to do. The second is found in verse 2 of chapter 4, we are to *preach the word*, we are to declare it.

Now let us look at the elements of the charge in some detail. First, we are to *abide* in what we have learned. Paul reminds Timothy of his twofold source of knowledge. The first is the Apostle Paul himself. He reminds him of his acquaintance with the Apostle. In verses 10 and 11 he gives a brief listing of his own characteristics in contrast to these men who are characterized by a corrupt mind and counterfeit faith. He says you have observed my life. He offers two concrete examples: the life he lived and the suffering that he endured.

I think these are basic tests of truth and sincerity. Does what a man teach have any effect on his life? Is he obedient to the truth that he himself espouses? Paul says he was and Timothy observed it in contrast to these false teachers whose lives were morally depraved. And secondly, is a man willing to suffer for what he believes? Paul was, and Timothy observed it. "*You* saw what happened to me at Lystra, and Iconium . . ." Lystra was Timothy's hometown and it was at Lystra that Paul was stoned and left for dead. Timothy saw him lying in the gutter. And he saw Paul rise to his feet and go back into the very town in which he was stoned, and proclaim the gospel. Paul says you know from your association with me as an apostle that I have lived what I have taught, and I have suffered for what I believed. You saw it. Now follow me, Be a good disciple.

Secondly, he reminds him of his knowledge or his acquaintance with the scriptures. From childhood Timothy had been taught the holy scriptures "which were able to make him wise unto salvation." Because his father was a Gentile unbeliever, Timothy had never been circumcised. Therefore he was unable to attend the services in the Jewish synagogue to hear the Old Testament expounded. But he had been taught by his godly mother and grandmother at home and he knew from personal experience that "all scripture is inspired by God and therefore is 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." Timothy knew that because of his knowledge of the word, he was comprehensively equipped for the work of the ministry.

Now that is the first aspect of Paul's charge to Timothy. He is to continue in what he has learned from Paul and from the Old Testament scriptures. He is not to be swept along with the tide, he is not to wallow in self-indulgence as these false teachers were; he is to abide in what he has learned. He is to stand fast.

Secondly, Timothy is to *preach* the word. He not only is to hold fast to the word of truth, he is to hold it forth. I cannot think of a better motto than, "Preach the word." We are responsible for proclaiming the gospel like a herald without fear or favoritism, because it is the word of God. Then Paul tells Timothy a bit about the mechanics of proclaiming it.

First, he says, "Timothy, *be urgent*." Or as J. B. Phillips says, "Never lose your sense of urgency." John Stott in one of his writings refers to a book on the pastorate by Richard Baxter and quotes a section:

"Whatever you do let men see that you are in good earnest. You cannot break men's hearts by jesting with them or telling them a smooth tale or patching up a good oration. Men will not cast away their dearest pleasures upon a drowsy request of one that seemeth not to mean as he speaks or to care much that his request be granted. Let us therefore rouse up ourselves unto the work of the Lord, and speak to our people as to their lives and save them as by violence, pulling them out of the fire."

He is to be urgent, and he is to preach it in *season and out of season*. He is to press it home on all occasions, when it is convenient, and when it is inconvenient; when he feels like it, and when he doesn't.

He is to use it to *convince* and to *rebuke* and *exhort*. The word of God speaks to men in different conditions, and can be applied in different ways. Some are full of doubt -- we are to convince them. Some are living in willful sin -- we are to rebuke them. Some are weak and fearful and need encouragement, and so we are to exhort them, i.e., encourage them and support them through the word. The word does all of this and more.

And finally, Paul says, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. I bracket those two together -- be unfailing in patient teaching." Although our proclamation is urgent and we must declare it with a sense of urgency, we must be patient and wait for the response. We are not to contrive decisions, but wait for God to work in lives and, Paul says, while you are waiting, keep on teaching. Declare the very great truths of the word of God that set men free. As Lewis Sperry Chafer used to say, "Keep giving people something to believe." What do you do when people won't hear you, when they stop their ears, and the world goes mad? You just keep teaching the word of God.

In verse 3 he adds just a note as to why Timothy must continue to keep on teaching. It is because the time will come when people won't listen to him anymore. They'll have a strange pathological problem. They will have itching ears and will be looking for someone to scratch them, just like my old dog. The world will be filled with people who will scratch their ears and make them feel good. They will listen to people who will teach them what they want to hear.

But you, Timothy, are not to pander to their tastes; you are to be different. You are to preach the word. You are not to preach the opinions of men, but the word of God. Therefore in verse 5 he says again, "As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." Because they are unstable, you are to be stable. Because they won't endure sound teaching, you must endure suffering. Because they are ignorant of the gospel, you must declare it. And because they will gather about themselves teachers who suit their own tastes, you must fulfill your ministry as a teacher; you must keep on teaching.

Paul says the time is coming when people will no longer want to hear the gospel. I believe that time has arrived. It is becoming difficult to gain a hearing for the gospel of Jesus Christ today, and I think it will become increasingly difficult. What then must be our response? We are first to *abide* in what we have learned. We are to be like a rock in a current -- unmovable, unshakeable, continuing in what we know is true. If the world goes mad, we are to stand fast. Secondly, we are to *preach the word* to friends, to neighbors, to employers and employees, to students and professors, and to anyone we encounter who will listen to the word. The harder the times, the deaf the people, the itchier their ears, the louder and the clearer must be our proclamation. This is our response to the times of terror.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for this clarion call to stand firm, and be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. You know we are tempted to give way. We ask that you will give us new backbone, new stamina and strength to stand firm. Give us that stability to continue in what we know is true and to preach the word to our needy generation. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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