

Terrible Times 2 Timothy 3:1-9

(Show slide 1 as soon as the sermon starts)

One of my favourite quotes about time comes from the film, *The Lord of the Rings*.

It's near the start when Gandolf is expected to arrive in the Shire, the place where the Hobbits live. He is running behind schedule and when he eventually turns up he is jokingly told off by Frodo Baggins for being late. **Gandolf replies, "A wizard is never late. Nor is he early. He arrives precisely when he means to."**

Try that next time you are late for work or for an appointment!

Not everyone in this room has the same **experience with time**.

Some of us are in a phase of life that seems to be whizzing by and we wish it would slow down. Others are experiencing the slowness of delay and wish the invisible traffic jam would clear.

Not everyone has the same **attitude to time**.

Some of us take time keeping very seriously and start twitching when people are late. Others are very chilled about our arrival time.

Even within ourselves we have a different attitude to time depending on what the occasion is. For example, how important is it to be there at the start time? It depends on what it is. Are we talking about catching a flight or going to work or turning up at a party?

If we are to understand the words of this section of **2 Timothy chapter 3**, it is crucial that we understand the time.

Change to slide 2 Look at verse 1. **Read verse 1.**

This language of **mark this** something signals that the apostle Paul is wanting to stress and emphasise something very important that may not be easily understood.

Mark this he says. Understand it. Take it to heart. Get your **highlighter** out and make sure you bear this in mind as you live out your faith.

There will be terrible times in the last days.

What time is it? There are different ways we can answer that question. It's 10:20/12:20. Or maybe it's time for the pastor to stop.

It's the last days.

It's fairly common for Christians to misunderstand that Biblical phrase. We assume it's about the final months or years preceding the future return of Jesus. And so as we see the news headlines and hear of world events, we ask each other the question, do you think we might be living in the last days?

We are definitely living in the last days.

Why? Listen to these two quotes from the New Testament.

Hebrews 1:1-2, "In the past God spoke to our ancestors 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 also he made the universe."

Acts 2:17 "'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams."

The last days describe the period between the arrival of Jesus first time and his coming again in glory.

The last days are the now days!

Why are they called the last days? The arrival of Jesus 2000 years ago is what everything in the Old Testament was pointing to. His birth changes everything. It has started the final chapter of human existence that will be ended by the return of Jesus.

I don't know if we are living in the last days of the last days but I do know we are living in what the Bible means by the last days. Indeed, all Christians throughout history have lived in those days.

Change to slide 3 In **2 Timothy 3:1**, we are told unmistakably that this period of human existence will be characterised by terrible times. Let's take this truth to heart. It's not that we are being told here that at some point in the future there will be a terrible time. No, it's that the age of the church will not be one of peace and prosperity, and all experienced in the absence of pain.

This doesn't mean that every minute will be terrible or that every year or decade will be terrible. However, it does mean that characteristic of the time between the first and second coming of Jesus is distress and disorder. And when we see it, it's not a sign that Jesus isn't king of the universe. No, this is what he promises ahead of time. He does this so we will get our expectations right.

The **key question** is, why are the times going to be terrible?

Taken together the whole of the Bible will give us a holistic picture of what to expect. This includes sickness, death and persecution.

However, what I'm keen to do this morning is ask, what particular piece of the terrible times jigsaw does the Apostle Paul emphasise in this part of his letter? Or put simple, what is God telling us here? Look at verse 2. **Read verses 2 to 4.**

Change to slide 4 **What will make these times terrible?** People.

Or more accurately people behaving in particular ways.

This is a **long** and **dark** list of **attitudes** and **actions** that cause times of distress for God's people. Indeed there are 18 specific examples of destructive behaviour.

We don't have time to go through the entire list, however, let me make a couple of observations.

First, it's good to have **concrete examples** of wrongdoing otherwise we are in danger of leaving everything in the world of theory and generalisation. This is safer to do as it means we ourselves will never have the spotlight of guilt pointed at us.

This list mentions one reason for the terrible times as people being **disobedient to their parents**. Lots of people wouldn't classify that as a big deal. And yet when we spot and ponder the consequences of disrespecting the authority structures in the home, it isn't hard to see the wider chaos in society that flows from it.

Second, within this long list there is a repeated reference to love gone wrong. Did you spot that?

- **Verse 2**, people will be lovers of themselves.
- **Verse 2** again, people will be lovers of money.
- **Verse 3**, people will not be lovers of the good.
- **Verse 4**, lovers of pleasure.

- **Verse 4** again, not lovers of God.

It is our disordered loves that lead to our destructive lives.

Who are these people? Our temptation is to say that these are the non-religious people outside the church, and the reason for our terrible times is because we have to live in a society characterised by such behaviour.

This is certainly true as we look at some of the **passions** and **priorities** of 21st century UK life.

However, if Paul is simply painting a picture of non-religious people outside the church he would never have written verse 5.

Listen to this. **Read verse 5.**

These people have a form of godliness but deny its power.

This means Paul **doesn't** have his sights set on atheistic people who have abandoned religious practices. No, he is describing people who self-identify as spiritual and who participate in religious activities.

And yet beneath the surface they are people characterised by disordered loves, ungodly behaviour and a blatant inability to believe the truth revealed in God's word, the Bible.

These spiritual phonies are normally keen to spread their influence rather than keep themselves to themselves.

Listen to what we're told in verse 6. **Read verses 6 and 7.**

This is not saying that all women are gullible and loaded down with sins. But some are. The dangerous religious people in Paul's day

sought them out in order to exercise their control, exert their influence and grow their false organisation.

This happens again and again. **Phony religion often preys on the vulnerable in secret ways.**

Verses 8 and 9 tell us how we can spot these kinds of people.

Verse 8. **Read verses 8 and 9.**

Jannes and Jambres are the names given to the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses before the exodus. Initially they performed the same miracles. But eventually they reached their limit and it became clear that Moses was true and they were false.

Paul says, time will tell. The truth of what is on the inside will eventually be revealed for all to see. We're not promised how long this will take. In the end, God will make it clear.

It's vital for us to realise that these phony spiritual leaders will be found both **outside** and **inside** the church.

It's easier to spot **outside the church**, however, even here we need to be aware of our cultural moment in the West. There is huge pressure to believe that all religions are essentially the same. However, they are not.

This means we must not encourage and participate in inter-faith services. We cannot give the impression that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe it sincerely. It really does matter!

Phony religious leaders are **more shocking when they are inside the church** of the Lord Jesus Christ. However, according to God's word we should expect to discover them during the last days.

Timothy certainly experienced this in the town of Ephesus. But this wasn't just a one off. It would happen frequently in the last days. These religious leaders end up building churches in their own image.

Or in other words, **their inner loves create organisations that value those passions.**

It can all be covered in God talk and pious ritual. Look out for versions of Christianity that promote the self, promote pleasure and promote prosperity. It may sound like Christianity but it bears nothing of the religion of Jesus, the one who took up his cross and sacrificed his life so others may live.

What does all this mean for us?

Change to slide 5 Four applications as we finish.

1. Don't just go to any church

Travel to a church where the Bible is faithfully taught and the people are being shaped as the Holy Spirit applies God's word.

How far should you travel?

How far would you commute to a job you love?

Well done if you are currently driving past lots of church buildings that have the form of godliness but lack its power.

2. Beware a form of Christianity that repackages self love, self pleasure and self prosperity using the language of Jesus

Beware worship of the self in a religious guise. Run away from a church where God is simply used to get what we really want.

3. Don't panic when the true colours of a phony Christian leader are revealed

It will be sad and shocking but it shouldn't be a surprise.

It doesn't need to shake our faith in the goodness of Jesus and his church.

Let's remember the words of Paul, mark this, there will be terrible times in the last days.

4. Make sure we have the true power of godliness not just the form of religion

Believing the gospel leads to godliness.

2 Timothy 1:6-8, "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God."

The gospel enables us to live holy lives in the last days

Let's pray.