

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFICULT TIMES

2 Timothy 3.1-9

When Scripture speaks of “the last days”, it refers to the current stage of redemptive history. We are in the last days and have been since the resurrection of Jesus. All the behaviors that Paul lists were present in first century Ephesus, which is why he told that congregation to “avoid such people” (2 Timothy 3.5). The same warning comes to us.

Understand the nature of false teachers

In what has so often been the case, the caution to Timothy is about deceit from within the sphere of the church. We know this because this group has “the appearance of godliness” (2 Timothy 3.5). The warning is not against “the world” at large, but rather about the world entering the church.

We see themes surrounding these false teachers.

- i. They exhibit disordered loves (2 Timothy 3.2, 4). Augustine remains one of the great commentators on this matter. “Beauty, which is indeed God's handiwork, but only a temporal, carnal, and lower kind of good, is not fitly loved in preference to God, the eternal, spiritual, and unchangeable good. When the miser prefers his gold to justice, it is through no fault of the gold, but of the man; and so with every created thing. For though it be good, it may be loved with an evil as well as with a good love: it is loved rightly when it is loved ordinally; evilly, when inordinately” (City of God, XV.22).

In recent times, Carl Trueman has written well on the emergence of the “modern self”. We think of the self as that which is detached from “any authority beyond that of personal psychological conviction” (*The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 36).

Self-love drives the other behaviors in the list.

- ii. Their self-interest leads to predatory behavior. This includes “abuse” (2 Timothy 3.2). Spiritual abuse means manipulating people by misrepresenting God. We can think of the prosperity gospel (telling people they will earn God’s favor by giving more money to the pastor), or through legalistic teaching that controls people with fear.

Those “who creep into households and capture weak women” is not a statement on the inherent gullibility of females, but rather the slippery tendencies of corrupt leaders who target those in vulnerable positions (2 Timothy 3.6).

We also have far too many examples of physical abuse across a wide range of churches.

- iii. They oppose the truth (2 Timothy 3.8). Jannes and Jambres are not directly mentioned in the Bible. It was well attested in extra-biblical literature that these two men were among the Egyptian magicians who were able to mimic God's signs for a short time before being exposed (Exodus 7.11-12). Naturally, love of self prevents us from being accountable to an authority outside ourselves.

While we need to be cautious concerning false theologies, it is the way of Jesus to be on guard against these behaviors in our own hearts.

Understand that victory comes through suffering

2 Timothy shows us that victory comes through trials. We could say that true Christians see the cross at the center of our faith. That Jesus redeemed us through His becoming human and being subjected to a torturous death teaches us that this path can be expected for His followers. In this light, we expect victory to come through dying to self and being raised with Christ.

The false teachers have sidelined the way of the cross for the way of human glory. Life is about pleasure and money more than the sacrificial mission.

Verse 9 ends on a note of hope. The "times of difficulty" chapter is not the last one for God's people. Jesus will put all things right in the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Key Idea: Understand the danger of worldliness

Application Questions:

What characteristics most stand out from the false teachers?

How do we combat these behaviors in ourselves and in our church, especially without falling into legalism?

In order to see what the New Heaven and New Earth will be like, list the positive behaviors that mirror the destructive behaviors of vv. 2-5.