

Web Master's Note: This is Reverend Salley's last sermon as Pastor of Bedford Presbyterian Church, Bedford, Virginia, serving sixteen wonderful years. May God Bless him.

The Last Word on God's Word 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Goodbyes make you think. They make you realize what you've had, what you've lost, and what you've taken for granted" (Author, Ritu Ghatourey), But also what's worth keeping through the years to come.

Remember the old joke about the fellow who was told, "*Cheer up. Things could be worse.*" So he did and sure enough, *things got worse.*" That in a nutshell is the message of 2 Timothy. This was the Apostle Paul's farewell letter, written from a prison cell in Rome to Timothy, a disciple who from his youth had traveled with Paul on his mission trips. Knowing that his own death was imminent, Paul was encouraging Timothy to faithfully keep on leading the young churches that they had planted together. But he also felt compelled to warn Timothy of difficult days to come. It is clear that Paul was deeply concerned about the cultural trends he saw, indicating that hard times for believers were coming; days of stress were just around the corner. If a Christian was not ready, if they didn't brace themselves in advance, they might be overwhelmed by the growing evil. So Paul wanted Timothy to be prepared for the worst.

Verse 1 is the key to this whole chapter. Paul writes,

"You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come;"

hearing such a warning, should bring several questions to your mind.

First, what does Paul mean by the expression, "last days?"

As the Bible uses it, the phrase "last days" has at least three meanings.

1. It can apply to the entirety of years between the first and second comings of Christ. Since Christ could have and can still come at any time during the entire church age, these past 2,000 years can all be called the "last days."
2. But "last days" can also apply just to unique periods of spiritual testing that have occurred at different times in different places throughout church history. Timothy and the young church were about to experience horrendous "last days" level of persecution under Roman rule.
3. Finally, it also can apply specifically to the very last years just before the Great Tribulation at the end of time, when the world moves into full blown rebellion

against God and His followers; this will be a terrible time of worldwide persecution only to be ended by Christ's 2nd coming.

Think of gauging the approach of the "last days" in terms of labor pains. A pregnant woman knows when she is about to give birth by the increasing frequency and severity of her labor pains. In the same way, the various troubles that Paul lists in the next few verses will always be present in some form, but will increase dramatically near the end of the age.

Are we in the "last days?"

No matter how you define it, the answer is yes. Since Christ can return at any time and since these past few years have seemed especially troublesome and only getting more so for the Christian Church, we may indeed be living in the final days before Christ's return to the earth. So Paul's warning to Timothy is still timely for us.

Which brings up the second question: what will these "last days" be like?

The word, here translated "distressing," occurs in only one other place in the New Testament, referring to a pair of violent, uncontrollable, demon possessed, men who terrorized people in the region of Gadara (Matthew 8:28). Like these men, the "last days" that Paul foresaw, would be violent, dangerous, savage times when people will cast off all moral restraint as society begins to disintegrate.

Paul went on to describe how people would act in these distressing days....

people will only be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, ⁴treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. (vs. 2-5)

In 1988 evangelical philosopher and theologian Carl Henry made a stunning prediction in his book, *Twilight of a Great Civilization* (Crossway Books); that as America progressively loses its Judeo-Christian heritage, paganism will grow bolder. What we saw in the last half of the 20th-century was a kind of benign humanism, but he predicted that by the start of the 21st-century, we would face a situation not unlike the first-century when the Christian faith confronted raw paganism—humanism with the pretty face ripped off, revealing the angry monster underneath. His words are coming truer with every passing day.

So Paul warns Timothy, "After I am gone, things are going to get worse before they get better. Buckle up, terrible days are coming." In a similar way, neither should we be naïve, thinking that everything is going to be okay. Barring a spiritual revival, our country is primed to face another, if not the ultimate "last days" event. It's not all

going to be okay. But forewarned is forearmed, if we know what might happen, we won't be surprised when it does.

So a third and certainly the most important question we should ask is

"How Do I Prepare Live In These Coming Last Days?"

With regard to all such godless people, at any time in history, Paul gives us two words of profound advice: **AVOID THEM**. Some people are so evil, so dangerous, so destructive, that you just need to stay completely away from them if at all possible.

But beyond avoidance, Paul continues on to advise what we can be doing, how we need to be preparing, in order to continue sharing the Gospel with anyone willing to listen even in such evil times. Whether the times are good or bad does not excuse us from working to fulfill the Great Commission for discipling the nations which Jesus gave to all of us, His followers.

If this is what we have to look forward to, and this is the task still before us, how then should we live? How will we survive the "savage days" that are coming our way?

Here then, in chapters three and four of his letter, Paul suggests four very practical survival strategies for Christians living in perilous, difficult, dangerous days in any age.

First, Follow Godly Leaders Whom You Have Come To Trust. Paul reminded his young disciple of his own life, which Timothy had personally observed, as encouragement for him to continue on in the ministry.

You have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith ... [now] continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it,

1 Timothy 3:10-13

The basic principle here, is that we become like the people we associate with. If we follow the ungodly, we will become like the ungodly. If we follow the arrogant, we are likely to become arrogant. If we follow those who follow Jesus, we are more likely to become like Jesus ourselves. In this case, Paul uses himself as an example, and says in effect, "*Follow me as I follow Christ.*" Using Paul as our example then, these are the characteristics of those godly people we are encouraged to follow:

1. They have nothing to hide. "*You know my way of life.*"
2. They teach the truth. "*You know my doctrine.*"

3. They practice what they preach. *"You know my faith, my love and my patience."*
4. They aren't afraid of persecution. *"You know my sufferings and my persecution."*

So we in our turn, need to find such godly people and follow them. I hope that I have left you a mostly good example of a fearless but loving Christian lifestyle to follow in the future. And I am certainly praying that your next pastor will also stand upon, and be willing to stand up for, Biblical truths in the face of societal pressure to compromise; instead of going along to get along.

Regarding the level of persecution, Paul points to his own experiences. In Antioch he was violently opposed by the local religious leaders. In Philippi he was beaten by a mob and thrown in jail, In Iconium he was almost stoned. In Lystra he was stoned and left for dead. All this Paul took in stride, because

"Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (v. 12).

What happened to Paul will happen to Timothy sooner or later. What is happening around the world to Christians in Sudan, China, Indonesia, Iran, in many of the Muslim countries, will also happen in the United States sooner or later.

No one gets a free pass that absolves them from suffering for Jesus. It may not involve beatings or torture or imprisonment or death; it may involve subtle forms of ridicule, public embarrassment, marginalization, being passed over for promotion, social rejection, and being the object of vicious rumors. That sort of thing happens all too often, even though it leaves no outward scars, it is a true form of persecution,.

As Paul pointed out, such persecution will only get worse before it gets better, because ***"wicked people and impostors [-Christian imposters -] will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived."*** (v. 13). Note that the word Paul used for "Christian imposters," can be translated, "magicians," or "soothsayers," or even, "jugglers." Watch out for those jugglers! In the first-century, such people were often traveling con artists, like those who run shell games on the sidewalks of big cities. They claim to be running honest games, but everything is rigged against you. In His kingdom parables (Mathew 13), Jesus warned us that the devil would both infiltrate and imitate the kingdom of God – the Church – with fake Christians and religious imposters, who want more than your money, they want your soul. Hence the Bible's caution to ...

Test everything;
hold fast to what is good;
abstain from every form of evil.
1 Thessalonians 5:21-22

When choosing your leaders – religious or political - let the buyer beware.

Second, Continue In What You Have Learned.

This second strategy is extremely practical. Remembering what you have learned and from whom you have learned it, stay the course. Don't be distracted by clever-sounding religious hucksters. Don't believe everyone who knocks at your door with some "new" understanding of God's Word. Neither God nor His guidance for life in this world have changed to fit the times. The 10 Commandments mean the same and teach the same unchanging life principals as they have for the last 4,000 years.

Paul encouraged Timothy to remember and trust what he had learned from his earliest years about the Spirit filled nature of Scripture.

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work 3:16-17

All Scripture (the Old and the New Testaments) is "God-breathed." That's a literal translation of the Greek word, meaning that God breathed out the words, and Moses wrote them down. God breathed out the words and Daniel wrote them down. God breathed out the words and Matthew wrote them down. God breathed out the words and Paul wrote them down. This is the highest possible view of Holy Scripture.

It's not as if Moses was inspired the way that Shakespeare was inspired. Shakespeare wrote wonderful plays with genius and witty turns of phrase; Moses wrote down the very words of God. The difference is total and complete.

Because the Bible comes directly from God, it can equip us for every good work.

- Do you want to know God's will? Read your Bible.
- Do you want to fulfill your mission in life? Study the Bible.
- Do you want to live a happier life? Apply the Bible.
- Do you want freedom from sin? Obey the Bible.
- Do you want God to be pleased with your life? Share the Bible.

God's guidance as recorded in the Bible, can both equip us and help us to stand even in distressing times. Ephesians 6:10-17

Paul's answer to surviving the "distressing times" that are coming in the last days is to **Know** God's Word! **Study** God's Word! **Obey** God's Word! But there's one more

vital aspect to surviving, even thriving, during distressing times, which is that we need also to be **proclaiming** God's word. As he urged Timothy, Paul also urges us...

proclaim the message; be persistent
whether the time is favorable or unfavorable;
convince, rebuke, and encourage,
with the utmost patience in teaching.

2 Tim. 4:1-2

For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully

In other words, the best way to be prepared for the distressing times to come, we must make the Bible the foundation of our life. Love it, believe it, follow it, and then teach it to others. That will keep you spiritually strong and give you confidence when trouble comes your way, as it must come sooner or later.

Sola scriptura was the cry of the Protestant Reformation. Sola scriptura means that Scripture alone is authoritative for the faith and practice of the Christian life. It is complete, authoritative and true. It is ALL we need to understand God's purpose for our lives, how we are to govern ourselves and what we have to give to our world.

I certainly pray that your next pastor will value and teach the Bible as much, if not even more than I do. So when I check back in on you in the coming years, I will find you thriving and continuing both in your Christian growth, your Biblical knowledge, and in your bold sharing of God's Word.

Thus, to summarize Paul's advice on how to live as a Christian in the "last days," we need to recognize that ...

- 1) The world will get worse — don't be surprised.
- 2) Tough times are coming — don't be discouraged.
- 3) It's easier to stand strong if you stand together under trusted leadership.
- 4) Believers who build their lives on the Bible may be persecuted but they will never be defeated.
- 5) So hold fast to what you have learned as God's truth – knowing the life and character of those who taught it to you .
- 6) And then be sure to use it as your rock solid moral guide, to pass it along, to proclaim it, teach it, and share it with all the patience and stubbornness which comes from knowing the truth that set you free in the first place.

Ministry in these next (these last?) days will be tough business. Only the strong will survive. But God has given us two advantages:

- 1) He has told us what will happen.
- 2) He has told us what to do; since we will never outgrow our need for God's Word in our life, we dare not live on yesterday's knowledge, but continue instead to grow in the Word day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year.

For your take home today, here are four questions to ask yourself as you think about this passage:

- 1) How am I building God's Word into my life?
- 2) Do I submit to the Word of God even when I might disagree or dislike something that it says?
- 3) Am I willing to run all my opinions through the grid of Holy Scripture?
- 4) And how am I boldly, patiently sharing God's Word with my family, my friends, and the world around me.

Here then is my parting prayer for you. May God make you a people of the Book united in ministry in a church that honors the Bible's guidance on all matters of faith and practice. May your families be built on the Book with parents and grandparents who love, and who love to teach, God's Word. May those who know us, if they know nothing else, know that we are a people "*who stand alone on the Word of God. The B.I.B.L.E.*"

Let's pray about this.