**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**The Message Of 2 Timothy (11): “Living In Difficult Times”**

**2 Timothy 3:1-9**

**July 2, 2023**

Anyone who reads 2 Timothy can see that opposition to the gospel was everywhere in Paul’s day. Paul himself had been arrested in Rome, chained, and imprisoned because of his commitment to preach it (1:11, 12; 2:9). Everybody in Asia had rejected him because of it (1:15). That’s one of the reasons Paul urges Timothy to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and to take his share of suffering as a good soldier of Christ (2:1-2).

Paul has also reminded him that those who endure suffering because of Christ will reign with Him in the age to come (2:11-13). He’s also warned him that the devil himself is behind all the “godless chatter” and “stupid controversies” spread by the false teachers of the day (2:14-26). But in the verses before us today, Paul makes it clear that opposition to the truth will not be limited to the apostolic age. It will come to *any* Christian in *any* age who stands firm in the truth of the gospel.

In this first section of the third chapter, Paul is predicting that “*difficult times*” will arise in “the last days” (v. 1). He goes on to tell us why; it’s because of bad people who spread evil and heresy and dead religion in the church (vv. 2-4). It’s no wonder Paul urges Timothy to “*avoid such men as these”* (v. 5). Clearly, he was anticipating a problem that would arise in Timothy’s day, which means that first century Christians were already living in “*the last days*.”

The last verses of this paragraph are perhaps the most important of all (vv. 6-9). They give us a description of the work of apostates (false teachers) within the church, and the kind of people they were captivating for their cause. These verses also assure us of the limitations of their success – despite their zealous efforts to proselytize others.

**A. The Announcement of The Coming Difficult Times (v. 1):** “*But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come*” (NASB). The “last days” is an expression often used in the New Testament to refer to the whole Messianic Age, which was promised in the Old Testament. They began with the first coming of Christ and include the present time.

The author of Hebrews, for example, begins his letter in this way: “*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways* (the Old Testament era), *but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son* (the New Testament era). Other New Testament authors also viewed their readers as living in the last days (1 John 2:18; Acts 2:16-17; 1 Peter 1:20). The same is true for Paul (v. 5).

Within this time frame, which has already extended more than twenty centuries, Paul predicts that shorter seasons will set in, which will be “*terrible times*” (NIV) or “*distressing times*” (NRSV), or “*difficult times*” (NASB). This word, as John Stott has explained, “implies either ‘hard to bear’ (for example, in the case of physical or mental pain) or ‘hard to deal with, violent, dangerous . . . menacing.’ The word was used in classical Greek both of dangerous wild animals and of the raging sea. Its only other New Testament occurrence is in the story of the two Gadarene demoniacs who were as savage and untamed as wild beasts, and whom Matthew describes as ‘so *fierce* that no one could pass that way’ (Matt. 8:28). This gives us an idea of the kind of seasons which the church must expect in the last days. They will be both painful and perilous, hard to endure and hard to cope with” (Guard the Gospel.)

**B. The Reason for the Difficult Times (vv. 2-5):** “*For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, rash, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – holding to an outward form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them*.”

Paul is listing eighteen characteristics of those who trouble the church (vv. 2-4). The first one says they will be “lovers of themselves,” and the last one says they will *not* be “lovers of God.” This suggests that what is fundamentally wrong with these people is that their love *is* *misdirected*. When self is first and God is last, the church always suffers; and when false teaching arises, some fall away (or apostatize). The root of the problem is moral, not doctrinal.

The second thing to note is that Paul is “most concerned about the moral degeneracy which sets in as a consequence of false teaching. In the list . . . there is a mixture of wrong actions and wrong attitudes . . . The list shows, in fact, the disastrous consequences of self-centeredness. There are several words here which point to arrogance – *boastful*, *proud*, *abusive* . . . *brutal* . . . *conceited*. The worst feature is that these people claim *some form* *of godliness*, pretending to be religious but having no intention of putting what they believe into practice (v. 5a)” (Guthrie).

This clearly indicates that Paul expects these individuals to appear *within* the church, rather than outside of it. Appearances can be deceiving, and an outward show of religion can mask *any and all* of the traits Paul has been describing in these verses. Concerning these people, John Stott has written, “They evidently attended the worship services of the church. They sang the hymns, said the “amen” to the prayers and put their money in the offering plate. They looked and sounded egregiously pious. But it was form without *power*, outward show without inward reality, religion without morals, faith without works.” (Hello America!)

No wonder Paul adds, “*have nothing to do with them*” (v. 5b). When it comes to the work of the gospel, the Bible does *not* teach ecumenicalism; it teaches the precise opposite. The most painful example of a major departure from this principle has been the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Billy’s cooperation with those who preached false doctrine has been well chronicled in Ian Murray’s, Evangelicalism Divided. Over the years, his evangelistic campaigns became dependent on the support of liberals and Roman Catholics.

**C. The Tactics of the False Teachers (vv. 6-9).** “*For among them are those who enter into households* (think of our door-to-door religious salesmen) *and capture weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth*. *And just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men of depraved mind, rejected as regards to the faith*. *But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men*.”

Subverting homes of professing Christians destabilizes the entire church. Among those whom Paul has described (vv. 2-5), some would “*creep into households*” (ESV) and succeed in “capturing” the allegiance of weak-willed women, already “weighed down” with the guilt of their past sins. Paul’s point was *not* that all women are weak-willed, but that some in Ephesus had been especially vulnerable to deception. They were continually “learning,” but “incapable of reaching any settled convictions . . . like little boats tossed hither and thither by a storm (Cf. Eph. 4:14)” (John Stott). Church history is full of examples of women who have been victimized in this way (think of the multitudinous wives of Brigham Young, the founder of Mormonism.)

As an example of the tactics of these false teachers, Paul drops the names of “Jannes and Jambres.” We won’t find them mentioned in the Old Testament, but according to Jewish tradition, these were the two chief magicians in Pharoah’s court. In Exodus 7:8-13, they opposed the ministry of Moses either by trickery or evil, supernatural powers, or a combination of both. In the same way, apostates (false teachers) within the professing church aggressively opposed the ministry of Paul and Timothy.

But once again, false teaching is portrayed in terms of deficient thinking. The minds of those troubling the church are “*corrupted*” (ESV), or “*depraved*” (NIV), having already rejected the truth, which is apostasy. In spite of their claims to have saving faith, they are “*disqualified regarding the faith”* (ESV). Theirs is a “*counterfeit faith*” (NIV), and despite their apparent success, they will ultimately fail. Just as it was true in the case of the two men who opposed Moses, they will not get very far (in gaining followers for their cause), and their folly will be plain to all. God will preserve His faithful remnant in every difficult season.

Here, then, is the take-away from this passage. ***First***, we are living in the last days. The Lord Jesus Christ brought them with Him at His first coming, and they will continue until His second coming. ***Second*,** these days will include seasons of peril and stress. “Church history confirms that this has been so. As the vessel of the Christian church put out to sea, it was not to expect a smooth, untroubled passage; it has been buffeted by storms and tempests and even hurricanes” (Stott). ***Third***, these perilous seasons will be the result of the aggressive activities and false teachings of bad people from within (think of “gay pride” and “Black Lives Matter” and Planned Parenthood advocates within today’s church). ***Fourth***, we must understand this so that we are prepared for these seasons of stress. ***Fifth***, and finally, there is only one command found within these verses: “*Avoid such people*” (v. 5). The people Paul is referencing are not pagans; they claim to know God and to believe in His only begotten Son. But their lives are devoid of the work of the Holy Spirit.

While we seek and pray for the repentance of such people, there comes a time when those who remain obstinate must be excluded from Christian fellowship. They are infectious and the Body of Christ cannot afford to catch this infection. We are called to stand out boldly against the prevailing winds, and to *be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus*.