

FINDING RESOURCES MORE IMPORTANT

2 Timothy 3

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2 Timothy 3:1–17 (NIV)

“But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth—men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone. You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking,

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correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

This last and most personal letter of Paul's, written by him from a lonely prison cubicle, is terse in its use of words. I guess I'm amazed at the fact that when a person has been shut off from communication for some time, when conversation opportunities are not presented freely, the mind stores up a great deal. So that if you kept a person who has just been in a lonely period of isolation, you will find in the first moments of conversation they are very succinct, penetrating, deep. This is the kind of feeling I get as I read Paul. You'll find that, if you have the temptation of a student, you'll immediately look at 2 Timothy 3 and say, "There are three lists: one contains 19 words, another contains 9, and another 7. You almost think that he might have just written it for college students to torment them on exams. Not at all. His lists are because the concepts behind them are so deep that the language which is coming out is coming out in powerfully abbreviated form.

I. The last days are upon the church.

In the first chapter of 2 Timothy, Paul's concern is on the task and the theme word recurring is "remember." In the second chapter, his focus seems to be on the present. Thus, he is saying to Timothy, "Be a good soldier of Christ Jesus." And the exhortations by and large, are in the present. In the third chapter, particularly the first half, his focus is upon the future. He looks to the last days. "Beware," he says, (or understand) "that in the last days there will be times of stress" (verse 1). That phrase "last days" in the New Testament can have one of two meanings. Or both meanings at the same time.

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One way that we understand “last days” is the frequent way that the New Testament is understood. “Last days” represents the epoch of time from the Day of Pentecost until the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Those are the last days.

We see this in Peter’s address in Acts where he quotes from the prophet Joel and he says, “In the last days I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh.” And then Joel goes on, as quoted by Peter, to indicate the advent of the Spirit of God upon men and women. Then, as the prophecy in Joel continues and as it’s quoted by Peter, it says that also in the last days there will be “signs and wonders in the heavens. Blood and fire and vapor of smoke.”

If we were looking at the totality of what’s involved in the last days we would perhaps adopt some terminology like this. The A.M. of the last days is the advent of the Spirit of God in our human life, the outpouring of God’s Spirit. That A.M. is to continue on through the course of the last days. The P.M., or the midnight hour of the last days, are the signs and wonders in the heavens—blood and fire and vapor of smoke. When everything that can be shaken will be shaken.

So when we read 2 Timothy 3 we must not simply think of these qualities as something to be yet unleashed on the world. They’re already at work. They’re already unleashed. We see Paul’s other lists of sins which he notes in Romans 1 are very comparable to what is given here. There’s a certain fierceness to these, which may not be in the earlier lists. But, nevertheless, a kind of a characterization of the age as it unfolds.

There’s a second way to understand “last days,” and that is the last days are the last days. The very end. The Scriptures throughout speak of the coming time when the advent of our Lord will occur. Prior to that advent there is to be tremendous unrest and social turmoil and lawlessness

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which the Antichrist himself will try to deal with by putting his own kind of law which is in itself the height of expression of lawlessness because he will rebel against God.

One does not do violence to the Scripture—in fact, one uses the Scripture fairly—if we think of pregnancy as a legitimate symbol for the age. For as the time of birth for the new age comes, the age will be in labor more and more severe, so that just before the birth of the new age, before Christ brings His kingdom to earth, there will be the most serious and severe contractions within nature through earthquakes and famine and within human society. Through the kinds of things which are being spoken of here.

So in the last days we see these qualities already being unleashed and we see them to yet manifest their most hideous character.

II. Recognize the characteristics of a godless society.

What are the qualities of godless society? There are nineteen of them that Paul gives. We wouldn't be able to remember all nineteen. We might look individually at each one in passing so we can get an impression, for that's what's most important.

Two qualities start it off. One is lover of self and the other is lover of money. In the Greek language these words are kind of a play on words. They begin the same way, just as in English it's "lover of..." By this we are to understand that the central most vices are the enthronement of self, or the "me first" philosophy, and everyone else second and God certainly third or nowhere around. That if you coupled that quest for putting yourself first with a quest for material gain and advantage and leave others and the Lord out it will unloose the kind of vices which follow in this chapter.

There then comes a series of other descriptions—"proud." The word "proud" actually came from a noun used to describe in ancient civilization a wandering medicine man who went from place

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to place with cures. So that the root word for “proud” is “a wanderer,” and it’s meant as someone who offered a cure or a panacea for everybody’s problems. It’s similar to what, lamentably, we see in our society with politicians who promise that if they’ll just be elected everything will be solved. Only to realize that we’re almost on a kind of cyclical wheel of misfortune. Sometimes even though we’re involved in the problems, they are so huge because of sin that there is a constant need to beat back the weeds.

A proud person is one who goes around saying, “I’ve got the solutions. It’s in me. If you’ll just listen to me, it will be done.” An arrogant person is someone who shows himself above someone else. Who honestly believes in his heart that he’s better than another person. That arrogance is seen in all kinds of ways. One of the most insidious ways in which it is seen is prejudice towards other people because of their race or their economic status or their faith.

Not only proud and arrogant, but abusive. The word literally here is blasphemy. It means a person who is insulting. Who makes a habit out of insulting other people.

Then there follows after the word “abusive” in verse 2 five singular words in the original text which all begin with the letter “a.” There’s a definite lyricism to Paul as he writes. He’s very sharp in his use of words. By beginning these next five words with the letter “a,” he is employing a device which we do when we take a word like “necessary” and we add to it two letters “un”—“unnecessary.” So we get instead of “necessary,” it’s “unnecessary.” By adding the prefix we make the word mean the exact opposite of what its root is. Or by taking the word “literate” and adding the letters “il,” we make it read the exact opposite of what its root means—“illiterate.” The Greeks added the letter “a” to a word to make it mean the exact opposite of what it was. When they added that letter it intensified the aspect of the word so that the quality which was being expressed was a strong quality. Thus for example “disobedience to parents” is more than a

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passive sort of disobedience. It is an active kind of disobedience, which marked breakdown within relationships within families.

The word “ungrateful.” The word “grateful” is the root word from which we derive the term Eucharist or thankfulness or thanksgiving. Instead of simply not being thankful, or being passively unthankful, there’s an active ungratefulness manifesting itself in speech and in conduct.

“Unholy” is the next term. “Holy” would mean someone who has the respect for the decencies of life. But an unholy person, we should think of this as a very strong term. It was used to describe a person who did not obey the natural bond. For example, a person who would marry someone in his own family. Like a mother marrying a son. Or something of that order. That is an unholy person, one who lets go of the normal decencies and morals of life.

And “without love.” Or the King James puts it better—“without natural affection.” For the word which is employed stands for the affection which is in family, the normal affection of a wife for a husband, of a parent for a child, a child for a parent. But without that, so that this quality emerges.

Then “unforgiving.” Someone who always has a chip on their shoulder and can never come to terms with peace. Or someone who, when they come to terms with peace, promptly turns around and breaks the peace.

And “slanderers.” The same word for the devil. Attacks reputations.

A “profligate.” A person who is without power. He has lost the ability of self-control. Not only profligate, but “fierce.” The word used to describe savage animals, persons who have lost natural sympathy. “Haters of good.” In the original, one word. Lovers of self, lovers of money, lovers of

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pleasure. But they are not lovers of good. How could a person love self, love money and love pleasure and not love the good?

Hugh Hefner would be an example of a person who loves self, loves money, loves pleasure, but he does not love the good. What is the good? The good are the moral decisions of life. The family patterns which God has established. The true beauty which He has given in life. The right way to walk. That's the good. A kind of incredible contrast here, saying that a person can love self, love pleasure, love money, but not really love the good. Therefore the active term is used—haters of good.

And in addition to that, another quality—treacherous, which is the word for traitors. Reckless, a person who plunges headlong in his folly. Swollen with conceit. Lifted up or puffed up with pride. Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

Then, the clincher in the fifth verse—holding the form of religion but denying the power of it. Which is to say, that even with this kind of moral turbulence there's still the attempt to hold on to some form of religious expression. To clothe one's immorality and wrongfulness with certain decency and respectability.

Our tendency as we read this verse is to immediately say this of course describes what's happening in society with the advancing crime problem. Right away we could take this passage and think of mean criminals. But we would do violence to Paul's understanding here or the Spirit's understanding if we just thought of this being those mean people out here. The thing is, these qualities are latent within every single human being. Even you and even me. We may not have all of them, but there are qualities in our life which are wrong and sinful, which seek to be expressed. They can be expressed even by individuals who are going through a form of religion. Paul says from among those who are practicing these qualities that have a form of religion are

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those who slip in as teachers. He had experienced this in the Christian community. Those who slipped in as teachers for, he uses the term, “weak women” (NASB). That is a term simply meaning a group intellectually curious about various religious fads that come along. Burdened with a heavy consciousness of sin, there still is a reaching out to a form of religion. So a form of religion will be embraced which is nontroublesome. Which does not involve or demand repentance or moral change.

Paul says from among these people who are described in verses 2–5 are those who slip in and who take sexual advantage of women who are burdened with sin and will not come to the truth.

The lamentable story of the history of the Christian church has been that this has been a continuing problem through the ages. Persons who have professed a relationship with Christ but have inwardly let other things spill out and over. In spite of the continual discussion about religion, a willingness to listen to anyone, there is an inability to arrive at or to know the truth.

This is a real warning for us in the frequency with which we pick up the Scripture. Or with which we listen to teachers. Or with which we read Christian literature and books. The danger is that we will hear much and not act, not respond, not experience.

Then Paul notes from history two persons who were like this, Jannes and Jambres. These men, by the way, are not mentioned in the Bible other than here in this reference. But it was common in the first century belief that among the court magicians who stood against Moses in Exodus 7 and 8, that there were two central magicians whose names were Jannes and Jambres. You recall when Aaron threw his rod down it became a serpent. The magicians threw their rods and they also became serpents. When Moses commanded the waters of the Nile to be as blood, these magicians could do the same thing. When frogs were brought upon the land, these magicians could do the same thing. They repeated the rod and the first two of the ten plagues. But after the

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first two they were not able to duplicate any other things. In other words, they had a certain kind of power in the occult to do miraculous things. But they had to stop short of the power of God. That's why Paul says they can proceed to a point but they will not get very far for their folly will be plain to all. It's a beautiful comparison to the false teachers, which even through their ministry are exercising stupendous things. It's a way of saying, "Yes, we admit wondrous things can be done. But only so far."

That's the crisis worse than economic—the moral crisis that ever lies underneath the surface of society. And which is waiting for its manifestation fully at the end of the age. One of my students recently said in a class...we were talking of the Antichrist, who he will be, what the character would be. This student had a profound perception. He said, "I believe that in every age, Satan has had the man ready." There are many prophetic books that have come out on the Antichrist. It is as if in each generation Satan prepares a man so that if God will allow the events to fit together this man could be popped into history. And there will be a final and full revelation of lawlessness. To say that the last days is a time of lawlessness is not to say that this also isn't a time of great testing.

III. Make use of spiritual resources.

In light of this tremendous crisis, what are the resources? Paul speaks of the resources that are for Timothy and for us in verses 10-17. Two main resources.

One resource for Timothy is the personal example that Paul himself had set. This is an encouragement and incentive and an exhortation for every Christian, to every Christian, to be themselves the kind of pattern that other people would be like. Paul notes some characteristics of his life.

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“My teaching, that is the doctrine I have. My conduct, you saw as I opened my life to you. You saw me as I was eating, when I was working, when I was preaching. You had a chance to be with me all through the moments of life. You’ve seen my conduct. You’ve seen my goal. You’ve seen my faith. You’ve seen my long fuse, my patience. You’ve seen my love. You’ve seen how I’m able to stand up under pressure; that is my steadfastness. You’ve seen my persecution and my sufferings. You’ve seen it right from the first day. You’ve seen it at Antioch, and Iconium, and at Lystra.”

In Acts 13 and 14, you find that that describes Paul’s first missionary journey. Towns now in central Turkey, then in Asia Minor. Whichever ones that Paul visited—Antioch, Iconium, Lystra—he was kicked out of the towns. Persecution drove him out. At Lystra he was stoned. But he picked himself back up and went back into the city. He didn’t let persecution run him off. That was important right now for Timothy. Timothy could recognize that he might be able to find fault with some who name the name of Christ. He might be able to point out inconsistencies in their life, which could be discouraging. But when Timothy got his eyes on Jesus Christ and also on Jesus’ servant Paul, he could see a pattern of consistency that was challenging and spiritually inspiring.

Paul, consistent with his life, the first missionary journey in 46–47 A.D., he’s saying, “Through many tribulations you must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Years later when he parts from the Ephesian church, which is where Timothy is at when this letter is being written, around 58–59 A.D., Paul tells him again there will be persecutions. Now again, he is saying, “The godly in Christ will suffer persecutions” (1 Timothy 3:12). We would much rather translate this verse as following, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will prosper.” That would

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be great if it would read that way. Prosper inwardly, yes. Prosper spiritually. But there is a comparison, that to the degree we look to the Lord we'll feel the pressure from the world.

So the personal example of Paul to Timothy is a resource which he has. We need one another for strength.

But beyond that there is the written Word, the Scriptures. Paul refers to them as the sacred writings. The only particular time in the text of the New Testament that that phrase is used. It's evidence that he's referring to the Old Testament Scripture. But if the Old Testament Scripture can be referred to as inspired, how much more the words of our Lord and the words of His apostles. I wonder at this point if Paul is conscious of a process of inspiration in his own life as he writes this letter, that he is not only aware of God inspiring him in the past, but he's aware of the present activity of the Holy Spirit as this word is breathed into being.

That word "inspired" literally means "breathed out." If we understood the term this would be better translated "the Word of God *expired*," rather than *inspired*. For the nature of inspiration is such that God breathed out and we do the breathing in. The Word of God is the product of His breath, the product of His life-giving activity. His Spirit. That same breath is the same breath which He gave to man, the physical man as the breath of life (the Book of Genesis). It's the same breath which in Ezekiel 37 gives life to dry bones or dead carcasses, which can be a phrase to describe our physical lives before Jesus Christ comes in. Jesus said that He would put a new spirit within us and the breath of God would come upon us. The breath of God gives us life. That activity of God, which brought man into existence, which will bring spiritual life into existence, is the same activity which brings the Word into existence.

Theologians can have all the fun they want to arguing about whether or not the Word of God is inspired. The Scriptures themselves give testimony to the reliability and the inspiration of the

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Word. It is insufficient to simply argue about a doctrine of inspiration. One must find in his own life that the Scriptures are not only inspired but inspiring. They not only are infallible for the past, but they are still the infallible guide for faith and practice.

The Scriptures do these things. They show us the way of salvation. How can we be saved, except we have this witness? They not only show us the way of salvation but they are also profitable for rebuking, or reproof. "Reproof" literally means "finding fault." That's the nature of Scripture, to find fault. They are as a mirror by which we look at the defects of our own life.

For "correction." They not only find fault, but they give us the ability to be straight again, which is the literal meaning of correction. Stand up straight those things which have fallen.

And for training in righteousness. And that we might be complete and equipped for every good work.

The purpose of Bible study is not simply that we will get something out of it. Which, of course, we will. But the purpose is that we might be better fitted to serve God and others as well. That it might have some usefulness, some practicality.

How do I apply this third chapter to my life? What is it saying to me?

"Stress" is a word in verse 1 that you and I are all familiar with. We undergo stress in our society. The stress of noise, of pollution, of traffic, the clock, of age, finances. You name it and we experience it. There are certain kinds of stress, however, which are clearly identified as being rooted in sins. The times of stress in verse 1 are caused as the result of the sins indicated in verses 2,3,4, and 5. As you look at the stresses within your own life, is it possible that the cause of the particular stress you're feeling is because you have let qualities dominate your life which are not pleasing to God and for which repentance and restoration need to be asked? The stress will go away as you yield the activity or the attitude which is wrong.

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Not only that question, but another also arises. When a person is being battled in his faith, and as doubts come, a common temptation is to begin to dwell on the doubts related to the faith. To wrestle on an intellectual level. So you hear people saying, who are skeptics, “I don’t believe ‘this’ because I don’t understand ‘that.’” When the real, deeper issue, as the Scriptures indicate, is that the problem of belief is something that is far deeper than the mind level. It is in the level of them morally. The level of the spirit. The level of obedience to truth. If you’re having intellectual problems with the faith, I would present that if you would allow Jesus Christ to really come into your life, that you would begin walking as He has walked, you’d be amazed at how those intellectual difficulties get cleared up as you bring yourself into moral obedience to Him. There is a correspondence to one’s doubts and one’s sins. The one feeds upon the other. A last question. As I look at the Scripture, does it change me? Does it speak to me? Does it really inspire me? Can I feel it with a force that the first writer must have felt as the Holy Spirit breathed His concepts and His thoughts into the writer? So that the work became a kind of incarnation of the Word of God. That the Word became like the person who was writing it. Paul’s writings are different from Peter’s. There’s an individuality that is there. But beyond that is the unmistakable impress of God which bears testimony within our spirit as we read it. Here is the truth. Here is life. Here is where all of life is at. If we would but come to Him, of whom the Scriptures speak, we would have life and have it abundantly.

Closing Prayer

We express our desire, Lord, for Your Word in the phrase, “Break thou the bread of life to me. Beyond the sacred page, I seek Thee, Lord.” That’s our cry today. To see beyond the verbs and the nouns, the word meaning, the grammatical constructions, the inflections, to see beyond the vehicle of language, You. Your glory, Your love and Your grace, and Your open hand stretched

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out toward us. I worship You, the living God. We thank You that You've called us to follow You. To be a partaker of Your righteousness and of Your life. Through this Communion which we now take, lift us where we've failed, heal us where we hurt, renew us where we are tired. Restore our souls. Lift us in these moments of worship beyond this room, beyond this time, into Your own very presence, for we want to worship and adore You. You have given us this opportunity and we are grateful.