

2. The Great Days we Live in

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Date: 30 November 2011

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[0 : 00] Please do be seated. Now let's pray and ask that as we come to God's word, he would give us eyes to see it, ears to hear it, and hearts to obey it.

Let's pray together. We thank you, gracious Father, that as we've just sung, we have good news to proclaim to all the earth that Jesus is Lord of all the earth.

And we thank you that that is true no matter what our own circumstances in life, no matter what is troubling us at the moment, that Jesus is Lord of all the earth.

And we pray, therefore, that for this short period we have this afternoon, you would please clear out from our minds the concerns of the day and that you would help us please to understand the words that we have set in front of us and that we'd be able to leave this place today with a clearer view of you and a clearer view of your gospel and that we would be glad to serve you in the service of that gospel.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, our reading this afternoon is from 2 Timothy, chapter 2.

[1 : 28] You'll find that on page 996 on the Bibles and the chairs. This is the second of our short series in 2 Timothy.

And I want to read from chapter 2, verse 22, through into chapter 3, where we're going to be spending most of our time for the next few minutes.

So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies. You know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.

God may perhaps grant them repentance, leading to a knowledge of the truth. And they may escape from the snare of the devil after being captured by him to do his will.

[2 : 35] But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.

Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

Just as Janners and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also opposed the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith.

But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as with that of those two men. I wonder how you feel about the times in which we live.

Are you optimistic? Contented? Happy about the way things are in the world? Or not so positive?

Does the state of society fill you with peace or anxiety, clarity or confusion, confidence or fear?

[4 : 09] I wonder. Are you hopeful about the future that your grandchildren and children will have?

Or are you anxious about their future? Are you hopeful about the state of the church and the progress of the gospel?

Or do you wonder really sometimes if God is in control of things with the way they are? What sort of times do we live in? And how do we respond rightly to those times?

We're going to be thinking today about the times we live in. What sort of times are these? Are they good times or bad times? And how should we respond?

We're in 2 Timothy and we'll be mainly in chapter 3 today. But before we go there, I want to do a bit of scene setting just to remind us where we are and what's going on. Paul's second letter to Timothy written as a letter with two readerships.

On the one hand, there is Timothy, the Christian worker. And looking over his shoulder, the church in the great city of Ephesus, the letter has them both in mind because both the church and the Christian worker face great difficulty and are in danger, believe it or not, of forgetting Jesus.

[5 : 30] Not of letting him drop out of mind or conversation, but forgetting what it means to follow him. And our key verses for this series are chapter 2, verses 8 and 9.

Please just turn back over the page and I'll read those verses to you. Chapter 2, verses 8 and 9.

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal, but the word of God is not bound.

Our series is called Remember Jesus Christ. The subtitle is An Antidote to Christmas. For Christmas is a time of tremendous unreality, is it not?

Not least about Jesus. And this letter provides a sharp dose of reality to mix in with all your mince pies and Christmas pudding and chocolate and all that other sickly stuff that happens at this time of year.

Before we get to chapter 3, let me pull out from our key verses a very important principle of gospel ministry that we'll need when we get to chapter 3.

[6 : 42] Here is the principle. If you want a free gospel message, you need a messenger who's prepared to be chained.

Free gospel, chained messenger. You'll see it there in verse 9. Paul is bound with chains as a criminal, but God's word is not bound.

Big surprise here that the gospel that brings freedom, life, immortality is linked to personal suffering. Now that really is a great surprise, is it not? You would expect the most liberating message in the universe to be associated with freedom, but in Paul's case, it's associated with captivity.

Is that not a surprise? I was speaking to a dear friend about the Christian message a couple of weeks ago. He asked this question. Look, what does it do for you now? It's a good question, isn't it?

[7 : 47] If it's so good, what difference does it make? And of course, there are many answers to that question, but one of them is rather counterintuitive. In many ways, it brings difficulty now.

For the apostle, it brings imprisonment now. Wouldn't you think that if something was really good and right and powerful and beautiful and true, it would make itself obvious by its benefits?

Well, not so for the apostle Paul at this point. Of course, the future is transformed by the gospel. Deliverance from God's wrath, eternal life, joy, glory, immortality, magnificent things.

But for the apostle, imprisonment now. Free gospel, chained messenger. It's a basic principle, but it is so hard to believe, don't you think?

If you were running a successful company, what would you want your corporate image to be like?

Well, if it was me, I would like the most impressive chief executive officer I could lay my hands on, and I'd like all the other representatives of the company to be healthy looking, and clean, and well dressed, and in possession of an iPhone to make them look good, wouldn't you?

[9 : 08] I would. In a culture like ours, a message whose representatives often end up beaten and in chains is very difficult to line up with.

And Christians, therefore, have always found it comfortable to forget that for Jesus before resurrection and exaltation came crucifixion. And for his servants, so often the price of a free gospel message is a chained gospel messenger.

Look at chapter 2, verse 9 again. I'm bound with chains as a criminal, but the word of God is not bound. What does Paul have to do for the chains to fall off his feet?

Well, simply to take his foot off the gospel pedal to change his message. That will instantly deliver him from all the hardships that he experiences. Only because he endures the chains is the gospel free to run.

That's the way it works. Now, let me ask you a question. How many times do you think you would need to be beaten or imprisoned before you began to wonder whether there might be an easier way to do this?

[10 : 24] How many times? Well, not many for me. It is very hard to keep believing and living what Paul believes and lives. And consequently, other gospels are always arising.

And the thing they all have in common is no matter how different they look, in one way or another, they make life easier for the messenger.

That is what false gospels are for. They make life easier for the messenger. They don't take their messengers to prison usually.

Paul says, if God's word is going to run free, God's worker needs to be ready for prison. It would be a great surprise to me if in the next generation in this country people do not go to prison for just doing the Christian gospel thing on a Sunday morning.

That would be a great surprise to me. We've been free of that for a long time, but it is not like that elsewhere in the world. And our times we've lived in are unusual and we ought to expect that not to go on forever.

[11 : 36] free gospel chained messenger. Christian workers and churches constantly need reminding of this. Now with that in mind, let's move on to chapter 3.

And here we meet the flip side of our basic principle. Free gospel chained messenger, false gospel free messenger. That I think is what chapter 3 is all about.

We start with a surprising instruction, verse 1. But understand this, says Paul, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty for people will be lovers of self, of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving, good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure, rather than lovers of God.

Now, is that not a surprising instruction as well? Think, why would anyone need to be persuaded that times of difficulty arise in this world?

Do you need to be persuaded of that? I don't. Do we live in times when people are lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, and abusive? Of course we do.

[12 : 55] Do you need anyone to persuade you that that is the case? Of course you don't. It's really obvious, isn't it? No one has any difficulty recognizing these things.

So what could Timothy possibly need to understand about this? Well, the answer is found at the beginning and at the end of this little paragraph.

Look at verse 1. What exactly is Timothy to understand? Not that there will be difficult times in this world, but that there will be difficult times in the last days.

Very important phrase, the last days. It means the gospel age, the days between the resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ and his return in glory, the days during which the gospel goes out in the world.

In those very, very special and important days, there will be times of great difficulty, says Paul.

What sort of difficulty? Well, not difficulty in the world out there, though of course there is, but difficulty in the church.

[14 : 08] Look at verse 5. Verse 5 is a little summing up of the bits that go before in verses 2 to 4, and Paul simply says that these people have the appearance of godliness, but deny its power.

He cannot be talking about the world out there, can he? For the world out there never has the appearance of godliness. The world out there always looks like verses 2 to 4 in one way or another. No, the people who have an appearance of godliness but deny its power are people in the church in Ephesus. In fact, the people he's talking about in verses 2 to 5 are people in church leadership, in ministry.

Let me prove that to you. Look at verse 6. Among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning but never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

Do you see there is teaching going on here and learning. People are learning from these individuals though they don't come to a knowledge of the truth through these individuals.

[15 : 21] The word household here is a word that the apostle Paul quite often uses not for just a house and the people who live there but for a household church and the people who meet there.

Paul is describing certain teachers in the household churches in Ephesus and it looks as though there are certain notable women in those churches who are being influenced by the untrue teaching and you get little glimpses of that in other places in 1 and 2 Timothy.

What does it mean that these people have a form of godliness but deny its power? What does that mean? Well, this is not the first mention of power in the letter.

Turn back to chapter 1 would you please? Chapter 1 verse 8. This is really Paul's first exaltation, his big headline statement for the letter.

Therefore, do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord nor of me his prisoner but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, he says.

[16:30] The power of God enables Paul and will enable Timothy to suffer difficulty for this gospel message. I take it that when he says in chapter 3 these people deny the power of godliness, he means that they are not willing to endure suffering in this way.

And of course, the only way to escape suffering is if your message is basically a message that the world likes to hear. That's the only way to escape difficulty for it.

let me summarize then. Paul has in view people who are in the church, teaching in the church, but really, verses 2 to 4, just like the world.

if you want a free gospel, you have to be willing to be a chained messenger. If you're willing to teach a false gospel, you can be a free messenger.

Now, I was never very good at maths at school, but those equations are very straightforward, aren't they? Very straightforward. Any three-year-old could understand that. Free gospel, chained messenger.

[17:45] False gospel, free messenger. They're very straightforward. What does Timothy need to understand here? He needs to understand that in this magnificent gospel age in which we live, there will be people in church leadership, ministers, elders, missionaries, youth workers, who look impressive, they have a form of godliness, but are unwilling to endure hardship for the gospel.

They deny its power. And though these people wear church leaders' clothes and go to church leaders' conferences and meetings and use church leaders' words, underneath, says Paul, they are representatives of the world.

They're cross-dressers, really, dressing up as one thing but actually being another thing. In a Christian-looking way, they love what the world loves. In Christian-sounding words, they say what the world says.

And consequently, they avoid the hardships that a real gospel worker must endure for the gospel to be free. Spiritual cross-dressers appearing to be one thing when they're another thing.

And that's what Timothy needs to understand here. Why does he need to understand it? Because such people can look impressive. They are listened to, verses 6 and 7.

[19:17] People follow them. Often their voice sounds like the voice of spirituality and reason, but that's just because they say what the world says all the time and what people like to hear.

Just notice what Paul adds to that. There are some encouragements here. Not everyone is listening to these people, only certain people. And notice he says that though they look successful now, they won't get very far.

Verses 8 and 9. The example he uses here is of the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses at the time of the Exodus. They might look impressive now, says Paul, but they won't get as far as you think they will.

So don't panic. There is some reassurance there, though things may seem very bad at the moment to Timothy in Ephesus. Now let's just step back and draw breath for a moment and reflect.

What sort of times do we live in? Well, in one sense, in the most important sense, we live in glorious times.

[20:26] We live in the last days, in the great gospel age. This is a tremendous age to live in. It really is.

For in this age, simply through hearing the good news about Jesus, people are being introduced all over the world every day to life and immortality.

Isn't that an amazing thing? Just through words about a person. Nothing less than that goes on when people hear and believe the gospel.

We live in amazing times. I visited another city in Scotland over the weekend. I met a man in church on Sunday morning. He came wandering up with his little daughter all dressed in pink in his arms. He said, seven years ago, I came through the door of this church. My life was in total disaster. For some reason, I have no idea why, I went along to a Christianity Explored course and I heard all about Jesus and my life has been transformed over these last seven years.

[21:30] Is that not an amazing thing? Just the words about Jesus do that in somebody's life. We live in amazing days when that kind of thing can happen. But it only happens if the Christian

messenger is willing to endure hardship.

It only happens if that's the case. And interestingly, the minister in that church had indeed been willing to endure hardship and had endured hardship.

And that's why the message was free. freedom. If your church leader teaches the gospel in such a way that people are being set free like that, you can be absolutely sure that somewhere in your church a Christian teacher has endured hardship for that freedom and probably is enduring it today for that freedom.

If your church is like that, you should be very thankful indeed. You really should. And you should do everything you can to encourage the leadership in your church and the people doing the teaching of the gospel in your church to keep at it because they will be enduring hardship for that more likely than not.

You only get a free gospel like that when the messenger is willing to endure difficulty and won't swap that hardship for something easier.

[22 : 56] So often, of course, it's not like that in church. the gospel is not clear. And so often lives are not being turned around. And the gospel worker, though he or she may be dressing up like a Christian, having the appearance of godliness is in fact just teaching a message that the world around is happy to hear.

And that transforms no one. In such ministries, sadly, people are captured rather than set free. Very simple equations, aren't they?

Free gospel, chained messenger. False gospel, free messenger. It's just the way it works. That's what Timothy needs to remember about the last days. That in this great gospel age, there are two things that look like gospel ministry, but only one of them is the real thing.

The sort that's willing to be in change. The other sort is not willing to be in change. It wants to be free and untroubled. It looks Christian. It wears the right sorts of clothes.

It uses the right kinds of words. It goes through the right sorts of motions. It does plenty of stuff and boy will it be busy at Christmas. But all it really does is follow the concerns of the world.

[24 : 13] Do you find that discouraging? Well, it is and it isn't. It's very easy, isn't it, to look at the way things are in the church and say, how awful. Paul says, don't panic.

Keep your head. He says that in chapter 4. Keep your head. It's just the way it is in these last days. It is that way. It's always been that way.

It was there back in Ephesus. It is here now, isn't it? It's just the same. There are two things that look like gospel ministries and only one of them is genuine. Paul says, well, it may look good now, doing the other thing, but it won't get very far in the end, so don't be put off by it and get on with doing the right thing.

We live in great gospel days. They've always looked like a muddle. Let's not panic and keep doing the right thing. Let's pray together.

we thank you, Heavenly Father, for your Son who endured such hostility against himself for our sake and for the joy that was set before him.

[25 : 31] We thank you for those in our own past who have faithfully taught us your words enduring difficulty as a result. We thank you for those in our churches who have done the same thing, though sometimes the cost of that has been very high.

We pray that you would make us wise for the times in which we live. Help us not to be downcast when we see falsehood masquerading as gospel.

And help us to be eager to serve your gospel, knowing that in the end you will reap from it a great harvest for your Son. We pray in his name.

Amen.