

3. The Godly Life

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we've just spoken to ourselves and one another, encouraging ourselves to rejoice at your greatness, at your sure mercy, at your great power, and in your wonderful words.

And we pray that for this short half hour together, you would please help us, Heavenly Father, to understand more about who you are and about how you've chosen to work in your world.

And we pray that you'd help us to rejoice at your mercy and your blessings and in your word. Help us now as we read and consider your word together.

Meet with us and change us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I'm going to read this afternoon from 2 Timothy, chapter 3, verse 10.

We're in the third of a short pre-Christmas series called Remember Jesus Christ. And we're reading from this letter, which is not a Christmas letter, but a ministry letter.

[1 : 20] And if the pressure is on for us at this time of year, when life is full of tinsel and wrapping paper and all that kind of stuff, to remember Jesus Christ, well, this letter reminds us that in Christian ministry, at every point, it is a struggle to remember Jesus Christ.

I'm going to read chapter 3, verses 10 to 17. The chapter begins with Paul describing the ministry of the false teachers in the church in Ephesus.

And he continues in verse 10. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus, will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

But as for you, continue in what you've learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you've been acquainted with the sacred writings, which were able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

[3 : 08] We live in an unusual phase of cultural life in this country at the moment.

It's unusual, I think, in two ways. The first is that the gospel of Jesus Christ has had a profound impact on this culture.

And that has meant that for an unusually long time now, it has been acceptable to be Christian in this culture.

Certainly, when I grew up in Scotland in the 1960s, it was not unusual for people to be in church. And it was not unusual to be unembarrassed about being associated with Christianity.

That has not by any means always been the case in the world throughout history. It's a good while since a godly pastor went to prison in this country for being a godly pastor.

[4 : 06] But it's quite normal for that to happen in other parts of the world. And it has also happened, of course, in other ages in this country. We have lived in unusually easy times.

The second thing that's unusual about the times in which we live is that the majority of the untrue teaching in churches in this country has not been that attractive looking.

Let me explain what I mean. The thing that has most eaten away at churches in this country is overwhelmingly theological liberalism. And I suppose it's fair to say, generalizing I know, that theological liberalism is as much defined by what it does not believe as by what it does.

That is to say, theological liberalism lives below the line of proper Christian belief. The Bible is a good book, but not the living word of God.

Jesus is a great man, but not quite as great as the Gospels portray him. His death is an important thing, but not quite as important as the Bible writers suggest that it is.

[5 : 20] And I could go on. It's good, but not quite good enough. And for many people, certainly for most people of my age or younger, that kind of Christianity has not really looked hugely attractive.

It hasn't changed lives, filled churches or transformed society. There was a time in this country, first half of the last century, perhaps, when despite the prevalence of liberal teaching in the churches, church buildings were full and church buildings multiplied.

But those days are long gone. And there's nothing terribly motivational looking now about that brand of false teaching. Until recently, we have lived in very easy times, and false teaching has not looked all that attractive.

And that makes 2 Timothy chapter 2 verses 12 and 13 quite difficult for us to get inside. In these two verses lies the heart of Timothy's difficulty in his ministry in Ephesus.

Timothy's problem is that if he conducts a true ministry, he'll have a very difficult time. He really will. On the other hand, there are those who conduct false ministries who are having a very good time, or so it would appear.

[6 : 42] That is what these verses describe. Verse 12 describes the hard time. Look at verse 12. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

We find it difficult to feel that, I think. Because in this country, in living memory, no gospel worker has gone to prison. The Apostle Paul is, however, writing from prison.

Though we know there are other difficulties in ministry, they don't seem quite as difficult as going to prison. So we find it hard to believe that verse 12 really speaks to our age.

That it will be very difficult to conduct Christian ministry in this life. And we read this letter and think, can it really be all that hard?

Can verse 12 really be true? Is that really true? Is that really true? Perhaps the problem is not the work, but the worker, some people have thought.

[7 : 43] Maybe that Timothy is a bit of a wet person, a bit spineless, a bit lacking in courage. And of course, that's how many people have interpreted this letter. The problem is not that the work is very hard, but that Timothy is rather timid.

That is to misunderstand this letter completely. Timothy's situation is very hard. Look at verse 13. Here's the easy time. While evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

Now, there are many things about verse 13 that we find it quite difficult to take seriously. First, that church leaders can be evil people.

Do you think of your church leaders as an evil person? I hope not. But evil is not a word we normally associate with the average, rather vague, liberal, not believing anything very much church leader.

We also read this and think, well, that picture doesn't look very attractive either. Who'd go for that? Bad to worse? Deceiving and being deceived?

[8 : 53] What's the big deal? We import our own imagery of a large, emptying church building and think, bad to worse? Well, yes.

But who would go for that? Doesn't look that attractive. And that is a great mistake for verse 13 describes what Timothy is being so attracted by.

Yes, the words are negative. But on the ground, it looks very attractive. What Timothy is having to deal with. In Ephesus, the false teaching looks very attractive.

Just for a reminder of that, turn back to chapter 2, verse 17. Here is an example of some of the false teachers in Ephesus. A little snapshot.

Verse 16. Avoid irreverent babble. It will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and the talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who swerve from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened, and upsetting the faith of some.

[10 : 01] Now, it's impossible to know what that looked like on the ground. But whatever it looked like, we can be pretty sure it looked a good deal better than what Paul looked like in prison over there, and what Timothy looked like.

The person who's promoting a resurrection ministry has got to be looking more impressive than the person who's in prison. Don't you think? Prison does not ooze resurrection life.

The prison cell does not have a sign above it saying, Welcome to the spiritual powerhouse.

Welcome to the vibrant Christian life.

Realize your potential. Enter into your destiny. Massive blessing awaits you here. Life-changing encounters with God to be had within.

Prison does not feel like that, does it? Now, the untrue teaching that Timothy was facing looked much more impressive than Timothy felt.

[11 : 11] And that's why it was so difficult for him to deal with. In other places in this world, I've got a friend who works in South Africa. He says, the biggest problem we have in ministry is the ministry of other churches locally, who promote a prosperity gospel.

Come to Jesus, and he will give you riches and everything you ever wanted. And he says, the frustrating thing about that is that their churches are full and our churches look very unimpressive. Even though they are deeply wrong. Don't you think that might be hard to compete with? To live with? That everybody's down the road following something untrue, and you're banging away at the truth, and everybody looks down on you for it.

Well, that's a flavor of what it's like in Ephesus. I said we live in unusual times, and we do. On the one hand, we're unaware of how hard it's normally been to conduct ministry in this world. On the other, we're used to a brand of false teaching that, frankly, isn't that impressive looking. But Timothy is dealing with something altogether more difficult. He's faced with a choice.

[12 : 24] Verse 12, of joining in with Paul and being just as unpopular. Or verse 13, of joining in with something that, though it looks wrong, is making progress.

It gets worse in itself, but it's getting bigger in numbers. How does Paul deal with that? Well, he does two things in this short passage.

He says two things to Timothy, and they are both introduced with the Greek words, but you. Verse 10, you, however.

And verse 14, but as for you. The first of these, Timothy, have confidence in the pattern that you have followed.

Paul contrasts the false pattern of ministry, verses 6 to 9, with his pattern of ministry. You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness.

[13 : 29] There are seven singular words here describing the things that Paul has been and done in his ministry.

And then there are two plural words. Verse 11, my persecutions and sufferings. And these are things that have been done to him as a consequence of his ministry.

Paul mentions the experiences in Antioch at Iconium and at Lystra. He's talking here about his first missionary journey. You can see it detailed in Acts.

And you can see that in the account in Acts, he experiences both great blessing on one hand and great persecutions on the other in all three places.

Timothy, of course, comes from Lystra. He's a Lystra boy. You find him in Acts chapter 16, verse 1. That's where he grew up. And presumably he's become a believer as a result of Paul's ministry there.

[14 : 30] And he's seen that the advance of the true gospel brings great hardship. He's seen it for himself. He is a product of a gospel that came to Lystra with great sufferings attached to it.

And he's seen what Paul did and how God sustained him. And Paul is saying here, look, you know. You know that the ministry that changed your life was characterized by this kind of behavior and this sort of response.

And you know, verse 11 and 12, that that pattern is not just for apostles, but for everyone. All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

In other words, Timothy, there is nothing abnormal about what you are going through now. Nothing. All you're doing is experiencing what every genuine gospel worker experiences.

Don't think there's anything wrong with you. And don't think there's anything wrong with what you're doing. And whatever you do, don't join in with verse 13. They may look impressive.

[15 : 46] They may be drawing the crowds. But they're evil imposters, deceivers and being deceived. It is always the case, says Paul, that the godly worker has a hard time.

And the false teacher seems to have a better time. Have confidence in the pattern that you have followed. You know it's right.

So don't shift from it. It is often a great help when in this sort of dilemma to call to mind a ministry that you know was the real deal.

I remember being involved in Christian leadership when I was a student. And there was tremendously attractive looking false message around at the time that was really ripping through

the student community.

And from time to time when faced with the difficulties of standing against that. I used to call to mind a senior Christian who I knew well and think about him and ask myself questions about him.

[16:56] Is he a real Christian? Yes, I know he's a real Christian. Has his ministry changed lives? It certainly has.

Mine included. I know it has. Would he go for this? Not in a million years he wouldn't. Well, think twice before going for it yourself.

I used to have that dialogue in my mind often. It was tremendously helpful to call to remembrance a pattern of ministry that I knew was the real thing.

Paul does exactly that here. You know me. You know what I'm like. You know what I've done. You know what I received in response.

That's the way it is. Don't give up on it. It is a great help in life to know that your experience is normal. I worked for some years as a doctor. And one of the best things you do as a doctor is tell people that they're completely normal.

[17:57] And it changes their lives. They come in looking really anxious and worried. And they sit down looking anxious and worried. They say, Doctor, I've got this thing. And you have a look at this thing.

And you say, Don't worry. It's completely normal. And they stand up a new person. They go out rejoicing that they're normal. They've still got the thing, whatever it is.

But they're quite normal about it. Now let me say, that is just what Paul is doing here. It's normal, he says. Nothing unusual about having a hard time in ministry.

Or feeling that the other guys are doing much better than you. It's normal. So don't shift from it.

Timothy, have confidence in the pattern that you have followed.

That's the first thing he says. Second thing he says, Timothy, have confidence in the truth that you have believed. Verse 14. But as for you, continuing what you've learned and firmly believe, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you've been acquainted with the sacred writings, which were able to make you wise for salvation, through faith in Jesus Christ.

[19:09] All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

Two things are mentioned here. First, Timothy's knowledge of the people who taught him. I think he's talking here about his family. And Timothy's knowledge of the scriptures that he was taught. They're not disconnected, these two things. The whole force of this is that the faithful people who taught Timothy faithfully taught him the scriptures.

And it's the scriptures that are the real source of help and power and equipping at a time like this and in every time. The very heart of Paul's methodology in this letter is to get Timothy back to his confidence in the scriptures.

If Timothy is to be confident in the gospel, the root to that is that his confidence in the scriptures is re-energized. What does Paul say about the scriptures here?

[20:20] Two things. One, that they are God-breathed, that God has spoken them out. They come from him. They are his words. And second, that because of this, they are very powerful words.

Verse 16, profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness. These are powerful words.

And the consequence of them is that, verse 17, the man of God, and I think he's talking here about the Christian worker, a bloke like Timothy, may be competent, equipped for every good work.

Timothy, be confident in the truth that you've been taught and in the scriptures, for they are what you need to be thoroughly kitted out for your ministry.

ministry. That's what he's saying here. Can I say that sometimes when life is difficult and when ministry is hard, the scriptures get left out.

[21:33] I think we know that to be true in normal life, don't we? When pressure is on in life, it's hard to get to the Bible. It's hard to get the Bible at the best of times, don't you find?

It's even harder when the pressure is on. One can become discouraged. What good will it be to give myself to the Bible today, bearing in mind all this other stuff that's going on in life?

One can become preoccupied. There is too much stuff to worry about, to focus on the Bible. Let me just say, whatever your situation, good or bad, hard or easy, is the Bible an active reality in your life

today?

Good question to ask that at every time. Is my life a life with meaningful interaction with the Word of God?

Don't have to beat ourselves up that we don't do it all the time. But are we getting to the Bible? It's a good question to ask. But can I say, and this is particularly pertinent to this letter, this is also a great pressure for those in Christian ministry.

[22 : 42] When opposition comes in ministry, it is very easy for the gospel worker to be distracted from the scriptures. Very easy. When times are hard in church, there are so many things to deal with that the Bible can be left on the shelf for too long.

When other ministries seem to prosper, and I wonder whether I'm doing the right thing deep down, there are so many other things that might be worth doing other than working hard at the Bible and teaching it to others.

The Bible does not seem powerful when you are trying to understand it and teach it to others. Do you think that your minister in your church always feels at gut level that the Bible is the thing to be giving himself to today?

Do you think he always gets up with that thought in mind? I don't think so. Do you think that your minister is always full of confidence that when he works hard to understand the scriptures and labors over teaching, that that is the best thing to be doing with his time?

I don't think so. Do you think your minister doesn't worry that if only he did this or that or the other thing a bit, then ministry would be more effective and go better?

[24 : 11] Of course he does. Let me say that if you have faithful teachers in your church, if the teaching in your church nourishes you and feeds you, you ought to be very grateful for that.

And it would be worth mentioning that. Don't you think? Let me say that if you were to go to your pastor this Sunday morning and say to him, look, I'm sure you don't always feel this, but you need to know that your teaching of the scriptures has changed my life and keeps my head above water on a weekly basis.

Please keep doing it. He would fall off his perch with surprise. And let me say that would be enough for him to keep going at it for a good six weeks at least.

And if you were to do that on a regular basis, he'd get better and better and better because he'd give it to himself more and more and more. It does not feel powerful when you're doing it.

And the gospel worker always feels ill-equipped for the work. But Paul tells him that if he has the scriptures, they equip him in every necessary way for the work that he is to give himself to.

[25 : 32] The times we live in are very unusual times. It has been unusually easy to be Christian and to engage in ministry. And much of the unbelief we deal with does not look all that attractive.

But both of those will change. Our key verse for this series is chapter 2, verse 8.

Be good just to turn to that as we finish. Remember Jesus Christ. Timothy is in danger of forgetting him. 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. How will Timothy remember Christ Jesus? By being confident in the pattern he followed and by being confident in the truth that he has believed.

Let's pray together. Paul says, Heavenly Father, we thank you for the Apostle's pattern of life and work.

[27 : 13] We thank you that he endured a great difficulty and you helped him to do that. We thank you for this reassuring word to Timothy in his difficulties.

And we pray, Heavenly Father, that we might take encouragement from this. That we might follow and be confident in the Apostle's pattern of life.

And that we might be confident in the scriptures that you have breathed out. We pray that we'd encourage those in ministry to be confident in your words.

and we pray that we might be confident in them ourselves. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.