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Q&A#25 Are We Living in the Last Days?

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Today's question: "How should we understand the description of bad behavior in the "Last Days" in 2 Timothy 3? For one, isn't the list of sinfulness characteristic of a great many ages and time periods? And in fact, its frequently used as a contemporary warning by preachers: "look at how much things are like this now. Truly these are the Last Days!" Can we find hope in this text?"

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Transcript

Today's question is, how should we understand the description of bad behaviour in the last days in 2 Timothy chapter 3? For one, isn't the list of sinful characteristics of a great many ages and time periods? And in fact, it's frequently used as a contemporary warning by preachers. Look at how many things are like this now. Truly, these are the last days.

Can we find hope in this text? I'll read the section in question, 2 Timothy 3, 1 following. But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come. For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power, and from such people turn away.

For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down by sins, led away by various lusts, always learning and never able

to come to the knowledge of the truth. Now as Janus and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth, men of corrupt minds disapproved concerning the faith. But they will progress no further, for their folly will be manifest to all, as theirs also was.

But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra, what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution, but evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in those things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the holy scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith, which is in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is given by inspiration by God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. Now this account of the latter days is not one that we just find in 2 Timothy, also in 1 Timothy 4, verse 1. Now the Spirit expressly says that in the latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies and hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by the word of God and with prayer.

So in both of these cases, Paul is speaking, and this is very important, Paul is speaking to Timothy. Timothy is a pastor of a church, and he is being addressed with this statement about the latter days. Paul is not giving us an abstract theological treatise about eschatology here.

He's giving a charge to a particular pastor in a particular context, and the warning that he gives, the statements that he makes about the latter days, are addressed to Timothy within the context that he is living in. And so I think that places certain controls upon the way that we're supposed to read this text. More generally within scripture, I think this needs to be seen in the light of the New Testament horizon being AD 70.

Most of the prophecy of the New Testament refers to AD 70, the collapse, the fall of the temple, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the removal of the competing system, as it were, that which was passing away, to leave behind the one new order of the church in its place, the new temple, the new Jerusalem, the people formed of Jew and Gentile, not just of Israel as a nation. So there's this overlap period, but AD 70 marks the end of that overlap period, and is the definitive point at which the church is established as a new entity, as a new reality that presents a completion of God's purpose, a fulfillment of the

promises that he had made, and as a result the old order is removed. The book of Revelation is largely about AD 72, and this is a difficult thing for many people to understand because the language just seems so intense.

How can we refer that to AD 70? Maybe I can address that in some other questions, but I would recommend you read some commentary on Revelation from this perspective, like Peter Lighthouse's recent commentary, two-volume commentary, which you can see behind me, I think. No, it isn't behind me, but it's a very good commentary, and I've been reading it lately. If we're thinking about these latter days, then, this is relevant to the experience of Timothy.

Timothy is living in the latter days. He's living in a time of where Israel is facing its great destruction, the judgment that will bring down the temple, and as a result the church will be left as the true new temple. The problem is that this is a time of testing, a time of testing where many people will be tempted to turn back.

I discussed this yesterday in my video on Hebrews. This is a time when many people will draw away from the faith, will reject the faith, and turn back to something that is about to be destroyed, and so the example that Paul gives here are those people that resisted Moses during the Exodus period in the run-up to the leaving Egypt, Janice and Jambres, these people who resisted Moses, and in a similar way, the gospel will face resistance in this period. There will be people rising up against it, and there will be an increase in ungodliness as this period of time plays out.

Now, if you read Matthew 24, you'll find a very similar thing. Jesus talks about the sign of the times and the end of the age. Now, as he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately saying, tell us when will these things be and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age? And Jesus answered and said to them, take heed that no one deceives you, for many will come in my name saying, I am the Christ and will deceive many, and you will hear of wars and rumors of wars.

See that you are not troubled, for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows.

Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many, and because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold, but he who endures to the end will be saved.

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come. So this is a significant passage because many of

these things are happening in every single age, but what we're talking about is within a single generation, within the generation that's taking place, within 40 years of Jesus speaking, the temple is going to be brought down. And during that time there will be a gradual escalation of wickedness, a gradual escalation from these early warning signs that are initial signs, but the time is not yet, to a period of greater tribulation where the church is more actively persecuted.

And from the end of that time, the end will come at the completion of that time. And it talks about famines, pestilences, earthquakes in various places. These are things that happen in every age, but there will be particular events that stand out within the church that runs up to the period of AD 70.

There will be an escalation of these sorts of things. And this is the sort of situation that Paul is speaking into when he addresses Timothy, that Timothy is living at a point considerably further on into this period of time where those last days are rapidly approaching, where there's about to be a cataclysmic shaking of the world order, as we read in Hebrews and as I discussed yesterday, the old order is about to be shaken. And so we're about to see what will remain.

Yet once more indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace by which we may serve acceptably with reverence and godly fear, for our God is consuming fire. So Timothy and the church that he is ministering to are living in the last days.

And Paul tells Timothy that he needs to be aware of what's going to happen in those days. And as things get further into that period of time, there will be a ramping up of persecution and there will be a falling away of certain people at that point of time. And people will reject the faith because it's too difficult.

And so this is a very powerful and challenging message that belongs at a particular juncture in history. It's not just an abstract message for all time, or it's not a message that has a wait for 2000 years and then it will be relevant message attached to it. No, this is addressed to a very particular pastor in a very particular context, a context where the world order is about to be shaken, not just by some general earthly events that can occur from time to time, but by a divine shaking of the administration of God's work, of the covenant order.

That's all going to be shaken with significant ramifications for people around the world, around the empire, people who are Jews and Gentile Christians will find so much is shaken up by this series of events. And so unless we've really kept this in mind, we'll struggle to read a lot of the events of the New Testament, which really can only be understood against this horizon of AD 70, this forthcoming of shaking of the covenant order. So can we find hope in this text? Yes, I think we can.

I think we can see God's control, God's power in these situations that God has brought about this change in history and he preserved his people through it and that he removed, as it were, the old order so that the new order might be more clearly seen. Now we find ourselves waiting for a new end of an age, the end of the age which will end with the end of all things, the end of the cosmic order, the present creation that is about to be destroyed and that will involve the general resurrection. And this involves a different sort of preparation for the end of the age.

So we need to be careful about that. One analogous in many ways to what Timothy is talking about here, but we need to recognise that Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse and Paul's teaching in places like this is not directly addressed to our situation. There are analogies, but we need to be careful of drawing a direct relationship between these two things.

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