

Terrible Times

“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” (2 Timothy 3:1-5a, NIV).

Paul wrote this warning to Timothy who was at Ephesus, but these prophetic verses really are intended for readers who are actually in the last days. And I believe – no, I’m convinced – that we, today, are this Scripture’s targeted readers. The verses are intended specifically for us. Let’s look closely at what Paul is saying.

But first we have to deal with an applicational problem: Is this prophecy describing how things will be in the church, or in society at large? There’s no clear answer, but whenever something in Scripture is ambiguous, it’s ambiguous deliberately. So let’s understand that Paul’s prophecy refers to both, how things will be in the church *and* in the society in which the church is embedded. That means this warning has another hook, it’s also critiquing the church for having imbibed or absorbed the characteristics of the world. That’s why the passage ends as it does [see below]. The church is certainly in view, and it will be experiencing the fulfillment of this prophecy. And a related problem is this: Is Paul referring to the Western world in which the Church then was established and growing, or did he have the whole wide world in mind? That’s more difficult to answer. Paul probably had the known world, what we today call the Western world, in view. I doubt Paul even knew about people groups in, for example, far East Asia or in the Americas. (But perhaps the Spirit has the whole world in view.)

Our next observation here is that there’s to be a colossal change in the character of things. Tranquil times will yield to “terrible times.” As history progresses thru the Church Age, there will be a long period in which things will be quiet and orderly, but then there will be a turn for the worse and the period will become turbulent. The Church Age has certainly been tumultuous. One immediately thinks of the Protestant Reformation and the counter-reformation, the European religious wars, the soft persecution of the church since the Enlightenment, and the fierce, violent persecution of believers in many parts of the world both in the past and in recent times. Yet, there is to be a change. Something is going to happen at the end of the era that will make all the above seem tranquil. “Terrible times” are coming.

I do not interpret the above to mean that the Church will experience the judgments of the Day of the Lord. The Church has already been judged at the cross. The Church will be removed from the world prior to the onset of the horrible judgments of that last “week” [seven years] of Daniel 9, just as Noah and his family were safely in the ark when the Flood came. In the evangelical church, we call this snatching of believers up to heaven the Rapture. But to say that “terrible times” are coming does mean that at the end of the Church Age, things in the church and in society will deteriorate; there will be total moral collapse. Let me unpack this.

At the time of the writing of the New Testament, the Greeks and then the Romans had so influenced the area of the Middle East and all around the Mediterranean that society there was largely livable. There was violence and brutality, of course, but in general, that part of the world enjoyed a modicum of peace. Not so the rest of the world. In Scripture, the Gentile nations are described as like the restless sea, in constant turmoil and turbulence, chaotic and fiercely pounding away at the bounds God had set. In Scripture, the world is ruled by a hierarchy of “principalities and powers,” by demons and by evil spirits. The people of the world were not just pagans, they were wicked and violent barbarians. And they were idolaters, all of them.

But as time progressed, the expanding Church had a profound influence on the world. Christianity spread to all continents and, although some individuals embraced Christ as Savior, societies in general gradually adopted biblical virtues. In other words, in the world, specifically the Western world which was most heavily influenced by the church, the virtues of Christianity were received. But not necessarily the Christ of Christianity. Thus the Ten Commandments (or at least the 2nd half of the Ten) were recognized as how we should behave. And other ideals from Scripture got incorporated into society’s structures and into people’s moral nature. Humility, being generous in giving, showing kindness to other people, concern for the welfare of others, truth-telling and honesty in general, being forgiving, the importance of the family and marriage, the equal status of women, being diligent in one’s work, the abhorrence of slavery, the importance of the individual as opposed to the collective, respect for others, a concern for justice and equality, the eschewal of cruelty, and a preference of peace. And more. The list is quite long. These are all virtues that society in the West adopted from the Bible. To the extent that Christianity penetrated other continents (Central and

South America, for example), Christianization of those societies also occurred. Let's call this embrace of biblical ideals "civilization." The Bible made the pagan world civil. We could interpret this Christianization as God's blessing, but that's conjectural. (The peace, security, prosperity and political freedoms that we've enjoyed in our nation can with more certainty be understood as blessings from God.)

But now, in the passage we're studying, Paul is saying that at the end of the Church Age, Western civilization will fail. The influence of Scripture on society will disappear. And the church, mirroring the world it inhabits, will likewise lose its core biblical features. Our society will revert to its primordial pagan state, *and the church* will become pagan as well. Let's examine some of the words and phrases in this passage.

- "Lovers of themselves" I've often remarked how people today are not only self-centered but narcissistic.
- "Lovers of money" If we had to identify one sin as characteristic of Americans, it would be greed.
- "Proud" Pride is a human characteristic; but in view here is arrogance.
- "Abusive" (the Greek word is *blasphemoi*). People on various media today routinely blaspheme God and think that it's funny. We blaspheme God with our Darwinism, our abortions, our vulgar culture, and more.
- "Without love" could be translated "heartless." Woke people today are actually calling for the elimination of those who disagree with them; they pride themselves on their passionate intolerance of those not woke.
- "Slandorous" (Greek, *diabolo*) may refer to being influenced or controlled by the demonic. In 1 Tim 4:1, Paul warns that in the last days, some Christians will abandon the faith to follow demonic deceptions.
- "Brutal" is the opposite of civilized. What Paul is describing in these verses here is the reversal of civilization, it's a reverting to paganism.
- "Rash" means tending to be reckless. Our electronic media today encourage recklessness in what we say and do.
- "A form of godliness but denying its power" could refer either to the absence of the indwelling Holy Spirit or to the failure of Christians to be transformed into Christ-likeness. The word "godliness" might refer to the acculturated biblical virtues of civilization that Americans have adopted as a sort of civil religion, but without salvation by faith in Christ.

The words Paul used in these several verses are exactly opposite to the character of Christ. Jesus was, for example, selfless, humble, obedient to His Father, holy, loving to the point of self-sacrifice, forgiving of sin and self-disciplined. His words were full of grace. He embraced going without material goods. Everything He did was in the power of the Spirit. He loved God so intensely that spending nights with Him—even the whole night—in prayer was His norm, and going to the cross was the fullest expression of His love for God. Christians are to mimic Christ, so they too are to express the very same characteristics that Jesus had. So Paul is essentially saying that at the end of the Church Age, Christians will be no longer reflecting Christ. They will be pagans, Christians in name only. And that society in general will abandon biblical virtues, reverting to its original pagan nature. Our world will return to the way it was at the end of the Book of Acts.

As we look around at society today, at our culture, at politics, at social interactions and relationships, at what and how we communicate, we see that our nation is changing with breath-taking suddenness. Civility is scorned. Truth is mocked while lies are both enforced and celebrated. There's not only intolerance of others, but anyone who doesn't agree with our values or believe what we believe is an enemy, someone to be hated. It's now supposed to be virtuous to hurt anyone who isn't also pagan. People have abandoned the use of reason in favor of passionate expression. The Creation mandates of Genesis 1 and 2 regarding sexual ethics and marriage are deliberately ignored if not ridiculed. God is not in our thoughts, ever. Violence is heavily in the background, ready to be deployed.

These verses in 2 Timothy are being fulfilled right before our eyes. The "terrible times" are now upon us. What this passage means therefore is, we're at the end of the Church Age. The Return of Christ is imminent as never before.

Dear Reader, you must, *must*, right now and going forward, be loyal to Christ and fully submitted to the Word of God. Or else you'll be carried away by the profound end-time changes occurring with demonic rapidity all around us. If you've not been involved in serving Christ in some biblical way, time to show your loyalty to Christ and His mission is running out. If you've allowed yourself to be distracted by recent political events, repent and immerse yourself in ministry instead. You may not have a lifetime ahead of you in which to glorify the One who rescued you from the dreadful condemnation we all deserve. If you've not been allowing the Word of God to transform your values and your thoughts, do it now while the opportunity remains. If Christ seems distant, or absent from your life because of prayerlessness, repent and learn to enjoy His nearness now – if you desire to know Him. The Return of Christ is imminent. These verses are warning us: We must be ready. See Jesus' stern warning in the ending verses of Mark 13.