2 Timothy 3

Series: “Tim Bits”

Sermon: “How are We Preparing?”

In the early part of the twelfth century, during the dark ages, a haggard old sorceress went to the Vatican with six sealed envelopes that she claimed had within them God’s revelation for the Roman Catholic Church. She appeared before the pope and said, “I will sell this revelation from God to the church for 50,000 pieces of gold. Well, as you can guess, the pope and the assembled clergy all groaned at the offer, and thereby declined.

And so right in front of the assembled priests and pope, she burned the first envelop. This caused a bit of anxiety among the ranks. Then she said, “Now I have five envelops which reveal God’s vision for the church, which you can have for 50,000 pieces of gold.” The clergy murmured, and talked amongst themselves but in the end they declined the offer. And so the sorceress burned the second envelop.

With an increased anxiety there was a less than subtle roar of disapproval from the assembled group. And then the woman said, “Now I have four envelops left, and my price has not changed.” Again with some anxiety the pope said no and in predictable fashion the woman burned up the envelop leaving only three. And the same thing happened and she burned up the fourth envelop leaving two.

Then she said, “I have only two envelops left, and I will let you see the revelation of God for 50,000 pieces of gold.” Well by now the anxiety in the room was so great, that the pope and his entourage could not hold back, and they agreed to buy the remaining two envelops. And do you want to know what was written on those two envelops. Well so do I, because they were written in Latin and I don’t read Latin. (Tales of a Tardy Oxcart, p.225)

There has always been a considerable interest in knowing the future. This explains all the fortune tellers, palm readers, and others who ply their trade. There is also, I have noticed, a considerable interest in the future in movies and television. Most often the genre of entertainment is referred to as post-apocalyptic. In each case: the book, movie, or television show depicts, for entertainment value, a vision of a post-apocalyptic world.

In some depictions, the world is devastated by war, like in the movie, “The Book of Eli”. Sometimes is comes at the hands of alien invaders like in “War of the Worlds”. Sometimes they depict a world ruined by environmental catastrophe like in the awful movie “Waterworld”. Then in Terminator, the machines get us. Right now, a few different depictions are floating around in which a virus nearly wipes out mankind like “I am Legend” and the popular “Walking Dead”.

Christians are not immune to speculating about a post-apocalyptic world, and in some ways maybe the early Christians invented it, or at least perfected the idea. This is especially true when dispensational theology came into vague, and so called experts in prophecy began speculating about the apocalypse. The word apocalypse is not the word of choice for the biblical writers, but instead they use a phrase, “the last days”. This is the phrase we encounter in today’s passage in Timothy. The phrase however, is a tricky one. What does Paul actually mean by “last days”?

In scripture, it is used in ways that imply at least three different meanings. They are related, but different also. The phrase “last days” can be used to describe the entire period between Christ’s first coming, and his second coming. It is an undefined period of time, since no one knows when Christ will return, not even Christ himself. Since Jesus can return at any time, it could be said the church is constantly living in “the last days”. Some church groups even employ this meaning in their church name, with something like “Later Days Ministries”. But please don’t confuse this with Mormon groups that use “Latter Day Saints”, although the meaning is the same.

The phrase also means a specific period of spiritual testing that can occur in different places, at different times. Times of persecution fit the meaning here. Apocalyptic themed scripture is almost always written in a time of persecution. This is the origin of much of its use in Daniel and Revelation where John writes to the persecuted church. Finally, it is also related to those final days, months, years even: right before Jesus’ return. Paul describes it in Romans as like a woman in labour, groaning in pain waiting for new life to come.

It is not clear which way Paul is using the phrase “Last Days” and it is possible he means all three. But it doesn’t really matter, because whichever way you use the phrase, we are all living in the last days. No matter how you slice it, we are in the last days. What is most important to hear from Paul is that these last days will be described as “difficult”. The word “difficult” is actually is too weak a translation. The word really means terrible; full or terror.

The word translated as terrible, or difficult, is only used one other time in the bible. It appears in Matthew 8:28ff. In this passage we read about two men who were possessed by demons. These two men lived in the cemetery, among the tombs. The word used to describe these two men is the same one Paul uses in 2 Timothy. They were so dangerous, that no one could go anywhere near them. In other words, they were violent, and frightening.

That is what the last days will be like; violent, frightening, and savage. The world will descend into chaos. So, maybe Hollywood got it partly right in its depictions of post-apocalyptic living. No one, it seems, is depicting it as a: wonderful, peaceful, pleasant time. In this time, people will lose all moral restraint, and society will begin to disintegrate. Savagery and terror will reign. And I don’t have to tell you that Paul was right. Just watch the news any night.

On Wednesday April 13 in the Toronto Star was a heart breaking article about the terrorist group Boko Haram in Nigeria. It was heart wrenching to read that in one year, the number of suicide bombers used by Boko Haram has gone from four to forty-four in one year. And that is not even the worst part of the story in my mind. The article is talking about children used as suicide bombers. Children, kidnapped and brainwashed and then used as weapons.

This slide into this mess was inevitable, as the bible tells us. We have seen in coming and picking up momentum for some time now. In 1988 evangelical philosopher and theologian Carl Henry made such a stunning prediction in his book *Twilight of a Great Civilization*. Although writing to an American audience, I think it applies equally to most places and people. Henry stated that as American progressively loses its Judeo-Christian heritage, paganism would grow bolder.

What we saw in the last half of the 20th century was a kind of benign humanism, but he predicted that by the start of the 21st, century, we would face a situation not unlike the first century when Christianity confronted raw paganism-humanism with its face ripped off, revealing the angry monster underneath. Henry’s words have come true, and are becoming truer every day. Just as Paul said to Timothy, “Things are not going to get better. They are going to get worse, a lot worse.”

“You should know this Timothy”. “Mark this Timothy”. Here are some signs of this slippery slope. Greed, scoffing at God, rebellious children, ungrateful people, unloving people, slander, no self-control and betrayal: and so much more. When people no longer fear God, there is little to restrain them from their baser selves. This is paganism in its beastliest form. As I already demonstrated; take any newspaper, and just read about how far we have fallen as a humanity.

Violence in the name of religion. Millionaires hiding money offshore to avoid taxes. Euthanasia. Women aborting girls so they can deliver only boys. Native reserves in such poverty, and hopelessness, that dozens commit suicide. Angry politicians demanding walls be erected, people deported, and bombs unleashed. All of this and so much more has confronted us of late. These are “later days”.

Then there is verse 5. “They will act as if they are religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly.” Much of what we see as evil is clear enough to see, but there are subtler forms that are increasingly dangerous. The most dangerous is people pretending to be religious, Christian even, and being far from God. They may say all the right things, do all the right things, but it will all be for religions sake not relationship with Christ.

One clear sign of this false living is our post-modern approach to faith. This type of religion allows people to do whatever they want, to make themselves happy, without any guilt and still claim to be right with God. They claim things like that the bible is 2,000 years old and its guide to living is out of date. I once had quite a disturbing conversation with a pastor in another denomination, who claimed sincerely, that the bible has to be interpreted through the lens of our culture, not our culture through the lens of scripture.

Not surprisingly, this same pastor had serious doubts about any assurance of salvation. He claimed that despite what the bible says, we can never be truly sure we are saved. In our post-modern world there are many sincere people who think all religions are the same, when clearly they cannot be since they contradict each other. There are a great number of people in this world that are religious, but they are still lost.

Paul is particularly critical of false teachers, especially teachers who prey on spiritually weak people. As an example, Paul talks about false teachers who worm their way into the homes of weak-willed women, or gullible women. I think there are weak-willed men too, but Paul is concerned about vulnerable people. People who are desperate. People who want to ease their conscience, explain away their sin, in simple ways.

These are the tactics of many a religious charlatan. Vulnerable people seeking forgiveness, healing, or hope, who fork over vast amounts of money to find it.

They do so, thinking it will magically solve their problem. As you know, there are religious broadcasters who know very well how to manipulate people. But they are not just on television. Did you catch Paul’s reference to two men named Jannes and Jambres in verse 8? This is a reference to an old Jewish tradition that uses these names to refer to the leaders of the magicians that confronted Moses in Pharaoh’s throne room in the book of Exodus chapter 7.

Remember the story? God tells Moses to have Aaron throw down his staff in front of Pharaoh. The staff immediately becomes a snake. Pharaoh calls for his magicians who through down their staffs and they become snakes, although Moses’ snake eats the other snakes. How did these magicians carry out this trick? Later on they also make water turn to blood, how is this possible? The answer to this mystery is frightening.

In the “last days” the devil will allow people to do miraculous things to lead people away. It will be terrible, as it was for those two men in Matthew 8 possessed by demons. So, a warning by Paul. Just because someone can do, or claims they can do miraculous tings in the name of God, doesn’t mean they serve God. Remember Matthew 7 in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says the following.

“On judgment day many will tell me, ‘Lord, Lord, we prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and preformed many miracles in your name.’ But I will reply, ‘I never knew you. Go away; the things you do are unauthorized.” (Matt. 7:22-23) I suspect from these words of Jesus, there will be many on judgment day who did amazing things in this life, but whose hearts were not God’s, and who will be denied any reward.

Paul’s goal here is for Timothy, and those he leads, to see clearly and truthfully the times they live in. The same goes for us. We need the Holy Spirit to show us the truth of all things. The old adage may apply to this is well; “If it’s too good to be true, it probably is.” So to counter this problem, Paul suggests Timothy stand strong, and not get discouraged by what is happening around him. Don’t let the world change you.

To stay strong, Paul suggest that believers follow godly leaders. Timothy was encouraged to follow Paul’s example. We too need godly examples in our lives to emulate. We are to find people of integrity, of true faith. We are to choose carefully who we will listen to, and whose preaching we apply to our lives. Just because it sounds good doesn’t mean it’s true. Sometimes the truest words ever spoken to us, can cut deep, and we should not avoid such truth.

Paul also tells us to continue in what we have learned. We are to know the basic truths of our faith and stick to them. That doesn’t mean we cannot learn something new, but when the foundations of our faith are challenged, we need to evaluate things very carefully. We are to know our bibles well. We are to immerse ourselves in the word to have knowledge to counter the lies perpetrated in this world.

As an example, study how Jesus dealt with Satan in the temptation story. The word of God is kind of like your fallback position. If what you hear being promoted, contradicts the scriptures, that should raise a red flag for you. The Word of God can lead you to all the right things. It teaches us to love, forgive, to serve others and so much more.

The scriptures are “God-breathed”. If we want to know about God, we need to read what he gave us. If we want a better life, then we read what God says about it. If we want a better marriage, we check out what God says about it. If we want to how to treat a co-worker or a neighbour, then let’s see what God has to say about it. As Baptists we are Protestants. The word Protestant means pro-testament. We are to be people of the book.

It is our greatest weapon to fight with in these “last days”. And from what Paul states, and what we see, and experience almost every day, we know we need all the help we can get. Years ago the American Banking Association did a really unique thing. It sponsored a two-week training program for bank tellers to help them detect counterfeit bills. The program was unique because not once in the entire two weeks did any teller even see a counterfeit bill.

They also did not hear one lecture on counterfeit currency. What did they do then? Glad you asked. All they did for the entire two weeks was handle authentic currency, real bills. Hour after hour the tellers were encouraged to count, shuffle, fold, and move currency around on a table. The idea was to make the tellers so familiar with real currency that no could possible fool them with a fake. (Tales of a Tardy Oxcart, p. 131)

That is why we need to immerse ourselves in scripture, and prayer, and good godly teaching. We need God’s truth to be so second nature to us that when a counterfeit idea or religion comes along we can spot a fake in an instant. The only question left today for all of us living in these “last days” is simply this; how prepared are you?