

Our Times. 2 Timothy 3:1-9

Great Expectation

Henry VIII married his fourth wife, Anne of Cleves, on the basis of a portrait of her by Hans Holbein the Younger. But when he met her, he confessed himself disappointed and said “She is nothing so fair as she hath been reported.”

And the marriage was never consummated and then annulled after six months.

It’s hard to live with disappointed expectations.

Expectations are so important

And expectations don’t just determine whether you are disappointed or satisfied

They can make all the difference between being adequately prepared, and being woefully exposed and vulnerable

If you are expecting the final exam to cover only what you have learnt in second semester, and find it was on the whole year’s work – you face failure

If you are walking or cross country skiing in the alpine areas – realistic expectations about the weather you might meet that guide your preparation can make the difference between life and death when the storm rolls in.

Expectations are vital to satisfaction and survival

What expectations do you have about what you will encounter as you live faithful to Jesus, and as you faithfully share the gospel?

Are you expecting to be able to live a peaceful, undisturbed life where you can just get on with your plans without any challenges, to find your life and message welcomed and respected?

Paul wants Timothy to have realistic expectations of what he will encounter as he embraces Paul’s call to unashamedly teach and preach the gospel he has received from Paul, the message of Jesus that brings life and immortality to those who believe.

He wants to prepare him for what he will encounter so he is ready when he meets it

2 Timothy 3: But know this: Hard times will come in the last days.

‘Know this’ he says

And if we are not going to be disappointed in our expectations of the Christian life, if we are going to be prepared to persevere as followers of Jesus in our times, not caught off guard or dangerously exposed to failure by what we meet

We should listen

For the description Paul gives of the times in which Timothy lives and ministers is true for us as well for both Timothy and we live in what Scripture calls ‘the last days’.

2 Timothy 3: But know this: Hard times will come in the last days.

The Last Days

The apostle Peter declared the arrival of the last days in the first proclamation of the Christian gospel in Acts 2, replacing the ‘afterwards’ in Joel 2 by “the last days”:

Acts 2:¹⁶ On the contrary, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

***¹⁷ And it will be in the last days, says God,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all people;
then your sons and your daughters will prophesy,***

***your young men will see visions,
and your old men will dream dreams.***

'In these last days' says the author of Hebrews 'God has spoken to us by His Son.

Heb. 1: Long ago God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets at different times and in different ways. ² In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son. God has appointed him heir of all things and made the universe through him.

The last days are all the time from Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension until He returns

They are called the last days because in God's plan the next thing is the end, His return in glory

Our Lord Jesus' victory on the cross has sealed the fate of the rebellion against God that has characterised what Paul can call this present evil age [Gal. 1:4], and His resurrection and pouring out of the Spirit in the present, features of what is promised of the age to come, tell us the coming of that age certain.

They show Christ has triumphed over all the enemies of God and has achieved the salvation of God's people, secured their presence in the new heaven and earth

And now we await the revealing of our Lord in glory and the final judgment.

Wait, while the gospel, the royal proclamation of God's saving triumph in His Son, goes to all nations

Matthew 24: ¹⁴ This good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed in all the world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

We are in the last days, and Paul says in the last days there will be 'hard times'

By hard times he doesn't mean times of being hard up, short of cash.

And Paul is not saying that people's experience of human history will be consistently bad, of all of life being like this all the time in all places

But he is warning we shouldn't expect our times to be consistently good, stable, and peaceful

The word hard was used of the behaviour of wild animals or the raging seas, threatening, dangerous, unpredictable. [cf. Matt. 8:28]

These are times that will be hard to deal with, times hard to anticipate and control

In Stott's phrase times 'painful and perilous, hard to endure and hard to cope with'

Times that will test us,

And that is a very different expectation from the one our society nurtures. Our society cultivates the idea that everything should get better and better, because we are so much more virtuous, so much more enlightened, so much more in control of the world, than people of past ages

Leading to many feeling let down and cheated if that is not their experience

Or overwhelmed with anxiety and fear when history seems to be taking a darker turn.

Taught by God, we expect and prepare ourselves for hard times.

know this: Hard times will come in the last days.

And what is the source of these hard times?

Perhaps you think of the events mentioned by Jesus as characteristic of this age

Famines, earthquake, pestilence

The catastrophic events that are predicted with climate change

External events that humanity can unite together to deal with

Paul points us not to these events, but to the behaviour of people as the source of the difficulties we will face in these last days

The hard times are not visited upon us but come from within us, – and so humanity takes them with us throughout time despite the great advancement in knowledge over the centuries

Every generation should expect them

We will have hard times because of continuing hard hearts

Hard times because of hard hearts vv. 2-4 [Titus 3:3-8]

2 Timothy 3:² For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, proud, demeaning, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy,³ unloving, irreconcilable, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, without love for what is good,⁴ traitors, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,

Paul is not saying every person will be all of these things

But he is saying our world will be full of people who are like this, who show one or more of these characteristics – and look around you and you know it is true.

And why will people be like this?

At its heart is misdirected love.

The whole list is sandwiched between love of self, love of money – the first two items – and the last two – lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God

That love of other things, created things, and above all the self, in place of love of God – is at the root of the world's instability, turmoil and grief

This is saying people will continue to be children of Adam – putting themselves in the place of God, trusting themselves rather than God's word, living to please themselves rather than God, and so willing to use other people to satisfy themselves

And that misdirected love will show. Her Paul mentions love of money and love of pleasure – the two great loves of our society

Where many pursue material wealth and pleasure

And we know this love of money is a root of all kinds of evil – the embezzlement of company funds, the cheating on tax, state supported gambling that impoverishes families, dishonesty that destroys community trust

And love of pleasure distracts from service of others, can lead to enslavement to drugs or sexual desire, the betrayal of trust

And then there are the other behaviours, all contributing to the world in which we live

Behaviours, for example, that destroy relationships, within and without families

disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy,³ unloving, irreconcilable,

Did you know elder abuse is increasing in our society, especially financial abuse – it is one of those things that make palliative care and geriatric physicians nervous about assisted dying or euthanasia

And we see people who are unloving - abandoning family – leaving many mothers to parent on their own, and others facing a lonely old age, and even destitute,

slanderers, without self-control, brutal, without love for what is good,⁴ traitors, reckless, conceited,

It is these attitudes and behaviours that bring grief, bring hard times, to individual, families, societies around the world – we see that

The pain and ruin of families through rebellious children

The eruption of violence, a teenager stabbed, and the devastation it brings in communities because of recklessness

The undermining of families through love of pleasure and the cascading effects of the loss of respect for authority, or the loss of capacity to form enduring trusting stable relationships

Sin, big S sin that says I will please myself not God, I will love created things in place of my Creator, is still resident in the hearts of humanity, and it brings hard times

To believer and unbeliever alike

Paul wants Timothy to know that, for these are times that will make the work of the gospel more difficult,

Civil unrest, for example, can make it hard to pursue plans to make the gospel known and people can react badly when their loves are confronted.

We need to be prepared for experiencing hard times can be discouraging

You can look at a society that has rejected truth in favour of its loves – of self, money and pleasure – a society like ours, and think – how can the gospel ever get a hearing here

You can look at the mess human sin has made of a life, and think – how can the message of the gospel address this

And that's when we have to remember – those hard hearted people Paul is describing – we were them.

We were in the grips of love of self, not loving God – and the gospel saved us

It can rescue others from sin

That is what Paul says in Titus

Titus 3:³ For we too were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved by various passions and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, detesting one another.

⁴ But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, ⁵ he saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy—through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

v. 3 – we too – and He saved us

People will be like this – and the gospel can rescue them

God's grace is more powerful

There will be hard times – but the gospel is still powerful to save in these times

Which makes it even more important to recognise and have nothing to do with the false religion these times also bring

Times of false religion v. 5

2 Timothy 3:⁴ traitors, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵ holding to the form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid these people.

We will meet people who hold to the form of godliness but deny its power, have the outward form of Christianity, but no reality, no substance to their profession

Counterfeits, and getting saddled with a counterfeit is always impoverishing.

But what does Paul mean by the power of godliness?

Paul has spoken of power earlier in 2 Timothy

2 Timothy 1: ⁷ For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but one of power, love, and sound judgment.

He has spoken of joining in suffering by the power of God 1:8, and of Timothy being able to guard the good deposit entrusted to him “through the Holy Spirit who lives in us.”

The power Paul is referring to is the power of the Spirit, the source of our regeneration and renewal, the Spirit the Lord Jesus gives to all who repent and believe the gospel

The Spirit who gives us a new heart that desires to do God’s will [Ezk. 36:25-27]

The Spirit who gives us understanding and conviction of the truth of God’s word [1 Cor. 2, 1 Cor. 12:2-3]

The Spirit who is powerful to put to death the misdeeds of the body [Romans 8:13] and who can bear in our lives the character of genuine godliness – Gal. 5:22 – the fruit of the Spirit

The Spirit who can sustain us in joy in suffering [Romans 5:4-5, 1 Thess,1:6]

The Spirit who turns us from love of this world to long for the resurrection life [Romans 8:23-24]

The Spirit we must not grieve by persisting in misuse of our tongue and indulging bitterness, anger, wrath, and malice [Eph. 4:29-31]

You cannot be Christ’s without His Spirit, and you cannot live the life of Christ’s follower without the Spirit

And the Spirit will show – it will show in a life that daily dies to self and comes alive to do God’s will, a life that is being transformed in character, a life that is growing in understanding and conviction of the truth of the gospel, a life different from hard hearts

People who claim to be Christian but show no evidence of the Spirit’s work, whose lives are unchanged and still engage in the greed or sexual immorality or abusive language of the world around them

Or who have no conviction of the truth of the gospel, who deny the realities of sin and judgment and Jesus being the only Saviour

Are to be avoided.

⁵ holding to the form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid these people.

They’re like a car without the engine – never going to go anywhere; Hop in, and you are just wasting your time

Or a kite with no wind

Or a body with a heart of stone. There is no life there.

We must avoid false religion, and to avoid it we must be able to discern it

And the best way – is to know for yourself the power of godliness, to be giving yourself to the work of the Spirit

So that you love and long for its fruit – and you expect it in other believers

And to be growing in understanding of the Spirit given word, so that you can recognise words, teaching that is not of the Spirit

Where you are doing that – when you meet those who say they are Christian and their lives don't match their profession, or when their confession doesn't conform to the truth of the gospel – you will know. You will sense something is not right, and look deeper

And taught by God you will avoid them. You won't keep fellowshiping with them or being taught by them.

Taught by them – that's right, for

in the last days we will meet those who are actively promoting that false religion for gain and opposing the truth of the gospel, preying upon the vulnerable

Times of false teachers v. 6-9; Exodus 7:11, 22, 8:7, 18-19; 9:11-12. [Matt. 7:15-23, 24:10-11; 1 Tim. 4:1-5; Titus 1:10-16, 2 Cor. 11:12-13; 1 John 2:18-19; 2 Peter 2, Jude 3-4]

2 Timothy 3:⁶ For among them are those who worm their way into households and deceive gullible women overwhelmed by sins and led astray by a variety of passions, ⁷ always learning and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. ⁸ Just as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so these also resist the truth. They are men who are corrupt in mind and worthless in regard to the faith. ⁹ But they will not make further progress, for their foolishness will be clear to all, as was the foolishness of Jannes and Jambres.

That mention of 'gullible women' jars in a society that is very sensitive to any suggestion that women might be not equal to men, that might characterise them as weaker or less able.

That is not Paul's point. He is not talking about the intrinsic nature of women at all.

Rather, he is speaking of a social reality.

In the ancient world most women were confined to the domestic sphere.

Not all – there are women like Lydia who was a merchant, Priscilla who was a partner of Aquila in business and faith.

But many were confined to the domestic sphere, often received little education and had no encouragement to participate in wider society, and so they were vulnerable to charlatans and peddlers of secret knowledge.

Paul is deliberate when he talks of false teachers worming their way into households. They sought to gain access to and intimacy with those whose life was confined to the domestic sphere, escaping public scrutiny,

And here the false teachers could meet people burdened by guilt and governed by their passions, needy people, often not equipped with intellectual or religious training

So they could peddle their lies freely. And the women were always learning because it was a source of income for the false teachers, they just kept leading them on – there was always some new speculation, always an invitation to go deeper. The truth was a destination impossible to attain for their hearers, for it was all lies.

The activity of these false teachers then and now is a cause of

Difficulty – because the false teachers by their unscrupulous pursuit of a following were creating suspicion of any Christian teaching in the wider community

And discouragement – because they were actively opposing the truth, contradicting the gospel that could have brought these women forgiveness and peace

You see these kind of charlatans today – exploiting the weak and vulnerable, the poor and the chronically ill, with promises of health and wealth - for gain, for their private jets and mansions like Kenneth Copeland, or enticing the psychologically vulnerable into communities built around the teacher where they are stripped of their wealth or worse to support the teacher

Paul likens them to the magicians in Pharaoh's court who actively opposed Moses when he was bringing the saving message of God to Israel, the message of their deliverance from Egypt [Exodus 7-8:19].

They are not named in Exodus, but later Jewish tradition gave them the names Jannes and Jambres

They opposed Moses by competing with him

When Aaron Turned his staff into a snake, so did they

Turned water into blood, so did they

Called frogs to cover the land, so did they

They wanted to show that their power was the same as Moses', that they and their gods were his equals

And their falsehoods stopped Pharaoh from paying attention to Moses, taking his message seriously, only made things worse for the Egyptians, not better!

And soon enough, by the third plague – the gnats, they could not compete and had to confess that Moses was exercising the power of God [Ex. 8:10], and then, with the sixth plague, boils, they could not even stand in Moses presence [Ex. 9:11]. Their humiliation was public and complete

Like those magicians, the emptiness of the teaching of such people who resist the truth and the foolishness of their opposition, will become obvious.

We should not give them the time of day.

Rather, living in the last days, we should be ready to test, confront and expose them. Listen to what Paul instructed Titus

Titus 1: ¹⁰ For there are many rebellious people, full of empty talk and deception, especially those from the circumcision party. ¹¹ It is necessary to silence them; they are ruining entire households by teaching what they shouldn't in order to get money dishonestly ¹³ This testimony is true. For this reason, rebuke them sharply,

The reality of false teachers in these last days means we need to be alert and equipped

We must be willing to test their lives – by their fruit you will know them [Matt. 7:15-23] –

And test their doctrine – does it conform to Scripture. And that is more than whether they quote this verse here or there.

Does it fit the big picture of Scripture, focusing on Jesus? Are there bits they leave out? Do they elevate the obscure and incidental?

That means you need to know Scripture well yourself, and know how it fits together. You need doctrine

That testing of life and teaching is hard of course if you are only listening to them on the internet, hearing only some of what they say, and knowing nothing of their background, goals, relationships – or at least only what they select to share with you.

That makes you very vulnerable to deception

An online community – self selected – which can so easily exclude those who disagree, is no substitute for an embodied, life exposed, in person Christian gathering.

Test what you hear, confront false teaching, and expose false teachers so that others are not taken in.

Times in which the Lord's people will know persecution vv. 12

The last days

Hard times because of hard hearts

Times when we will encounter false religion

Times when we will meet, and the work of the gospel will be opposed by, false teachers

And also times when we believers – in a world where people are lovers of self, of money, and of pleasure

Will face persecution – as Paul did

While those who are teaching error will find acceptance and a hearing

2 Timothy 3:¹⁰ But you have followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, and endurance,¹¹ along with the persecutions and sufferings that came to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured—and yet the Lord rescued me from them all.¹² In fact, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

We need to expect these things, to have realistic expectations about our times

And to be prepared to deal with them

But good preparation also means having realistic expectations about the power and truth of the gospel

And about our end and their end revealed by the gospel

Realistic expectations about

What will happen to the hard hearted

To those whose religion is empty

To those who persevere in promoting their error

But know their end v. 9, v. 13, and the End.

2 Timothy 3:⁹ But they will not make further progress, for their foolishness will be clear to all, as was the foolishness of Jannes and Jambres.

2 Timothy 3:¹³ Evil people and impostors will become worse, deceiving and being deceived.

In this life often the error, the foolishness, of those who oppose the teaching of the gospel is exposed. Their greed and self interest becomes apparent, or their sexual misbehaviour, or the emptiness of what they prophesy

And in this life often people will sink deeper and deeper into their lies. Embracing lies they lose the ability to distinguish truth from error, deceiving they are also deceived.

But whether their error is recognised, exposed now or not

just as the depth of the error of the magicians who opposed Moses was exposed when Moses led the people of Israel to freedom through the sea.

The foolishness of all who oppose the gospel will be fully exposed at the last day when the saving triumph of the Lord Jesus is revealed and His people rise with Him,

Paul has spoken of that day already, the day when the gospel messenger will be vindicated by the revealing in glory of our Lord Jesus [2 Tim. 1:12]

And the gospel tells us that day is sure

The gospel proclaims Jesus risen from the dead, son of David

2 Timothy 2:⁸ Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead and descended from David, according to my gospel,

It tells us He has triumphed over death and the one who has the power of death – it is not a maybe

And He has triumphed as the Son of David, the One who will rule the nations with a rod of iron, to whom all will give account

We are only talking about the hard time we will face in the last days – because Jesus has come and triumphed – the very phrase – the last days - carries in it the reason to persevere, for it assures us of God’s certain plan, and of what is next in that plan.

The revealing of the Kingdom of God,

In the parable of the wheat and the weeds Jesus describes the end of the age in this way v.41

Matthew 13: The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. ⁴⁰ Therefore, just as the weeds are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will gather from his kingdom all who cause sin and those guilty of lawlessness. ⁴² They will throw them into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father’s kingdom. Let anyone who has ears listen.

[Matthew 13:47-50]

And that phrase ‘the last days’ also tells you that despite the character of our age and the resistance and opposition the gospel will face, preaching the gospel through the world is not some quixotic activity, a vain attempt to turn back the flood of rebellion against God, – but the main game.

Proclaiming the good news of Jesus’ reign is why there still are last days

These are not just hard times, but times of opportunity

Matthew 24: ¹⁴ This good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed in all the world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

*Matthew 28: ¹⁸ Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, **to the end of the age.**”*

We should have realistic expectations about our time, about the last days

About the inevitability of hard times

Of the presence of false religion

Of the activity of false teachers opposing the gospel

But we must also have realistic expectations about their end and the End, what comes next when the gospel is preached to all nations

And expect then what Jesus has promised to all believers who persevere through these times

2 Timothy 2: ¹¹ This saying is trustworthy:

*For if we died with him,
we will also live with him;*

¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him;

We will also reign with Him

That word is certain, and so these days are like the pains of labour that precede the joy of the birth, passing pain for long term gain, present grief for abiding joy

So prepare yourself to live through the last days, to be unashamed of the gospel in the last days

Know and understand God's word

Practice genuine godliness in the power of the spirit

Have nothing to do with false, empty religion

Confront and expose error

And keep making the gospel known, confident of the power of the gospel to change even hard hearts, as it has changed yours and mine.

Not only to change hearts but to bring forgiven sinners to share in the revelation of the triumph of the Lord Jesus when these days are ended.

Come Lord Jesus, come.