

Godly Ministry in the Last Days (Part 1)

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 11th of February 2001.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Godly Ministry in the Last Days and is from 2 Timothy 3.10-17.

I encourage you to, if you can, open the Bibles in the pews at page 967 to the first reading from 2 Timothy 3. And we're resuming our sermon series from Paul's second letter to Timothy.

And we'll finish it over the next two weeks after this. Well, every time I go to the supermarket, I'm tempted to buy one of those products that boast that it is a new and improved recipe or formula.

You can buy packets of stir-fry and every week it seems they've got a new and improved formula. Now, I sometimes wonder to myself, has this been new and improved since last Friday when I came here to the supermarket to buy this product?

[1 : 09] I wonder how many versions of Omo they've gone through over the years because it seems to me that every version of Omo that's ever been has been new and improved or advanced formula to get your washing even whiter, which is not all that attractive when you've got red shirts and things, but nonetheless, it seems to me that if the boast is correct, every day they're producing a new version and an improved and an advanced and progressive version.

And whether it's Omo or stir-fries or new cars or whatever, it seems that they're trying to sell their product, probably quite successfully, by boasting that this is new, improved or advanced.

Now, the same happens in theological circles as well. Every now and again, there's a new book or article or interview with some churchman or scholar boasting that we have here a new and improved version of the gospel or of Christian faith with better understanding, better application, better for everyone all around.

And over the years, I guess in my study, in particular in Old Testament, but in other strands of theology as well, there are new criticisms, new literary methods, new orthodoxy, progressive orthodoxy, the new Jesus quest, the even newer Jesus quest, and the brand new Jesus quest, I think.

It's new this, new that, and always it's trying to attract and appeal to people, saying this is better than what we had before. But there's nothing new under the sun because all of these newfangled ideas and ways of thinking about the gospel and Jesus, they've been around for decades, for centuries.

[2 : 46] And in Paul's day in the 60s AD, just 30 years after the resurrection, there were those in Ephesus where Timothy was when he received this letter, who were facing people who were boasting that they had a new and better gospel, an advanced or progressive gospel.

And they were attracting people, it seems, away from the truth of the gospel to these new advanced ways of thinking about the gospel and Jesus. I think in this letter, a few times, Paul, with some barbed irony, attacks that view.

Back in chapter 2, verse 16, he said to Timothy, avoid profane chatter, for it will lead and literally advance or progress people into more and more impiety.

I think probably what Paul has done there is actually pick up on the false teachers who are boasting that they are progressive and advanced and said, all they'll progress you to or all they'll advance you to is more and more impiety.

Not better truth or a better gospel, but actually in the opposite direction. The same thing I think happens in chapter 3, verse 9, where we finished two weeks ago. Paul says about the false teachers that they will not make much progress because, as in the case of those two men he referred to, their folly will become plain to everyone.

[4 : 07] Again, I think he's picking up their boast that they are progressive and he says they're not going to make much progress. In fact, what they teach is folly. Paul is, I think, mocking their claims to be progressive.

Rather than moving on and advancing and progressing with a new and improved formula for the gospel, Paul says to Timothy in the key word of this passage, the rest of the chapter, verses 10 to 17, in verse 14, he says, continue.

Literally, remain or abide. Stand still. Don't progress or advance or move on because the gospel you began in is the best gospel, the true gospel, the right gospel.

So any movement will not actually be progress, but regress. So continue in the true gospel that you, Timothy, began your Christian life in.

Stand in it. So it's very much a contrast. The false teachers are claiming that they have progressed upwards. They've advanced the gospel and the teaching and everything associated with it.

[5 : 15] In contrast to them, Paul says to Timothy, abide, stand, remain, continue in the gospel you've received. Now there's a very strong contrast built up in these verses 10 to 17 with the false teachers we saw two weeks ago in verses 1 to 9.

Verse 10 begins, but you, they, the false teachers and descriptions of them, but you, Timothy, in contrast to them. And the same comes in verse 14. But as for you, in contrast to the false teachers and all their adherents in the verses 1 to 9.

So there, in this section, verses 10 to 17, there are two arguments, basically, about why Timothy is to stand firm in the gospel that he's already begun his Christian life and ministry in.

The first argument, verses 10 to 13, deals with Paul's own life and ministry. And the second argument, verses 15 to the end, deals with Timothy's teaching, being taught by the scriptures.

So firstly, verses 10 to 13, Paul's example for Timothy. Timothy, he says to him, he reminds him about what he himself has done with a long list.

[6 : 29] Notice how verses begin. You have observed or followed, seen, my teaching, conduct, aim in life, faith, patience, love, steadfastness, persecutions, and suffering. A long list of things that Timothy has observed and followed from Paul's life.

He begins with his teaching. And throughout this example, Paul is distancing himself from the false teachers. So not only is he exhorting Timothy to be different from them, but he's saying, I, Paul, am different from them.

You've seen me and seen how different I am from these false teachers that are now in Ephesus. So firstly, Paul's teaching, he says, you've seen it, you've heard it.

Hold fast to it is what he's already said to Timothy back in chapter 1. Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you've heard from me. My teaching, he's saying, is different from the teaching of these false teachers.

Hold fast to mine. Don't go after theirs. Secondly, Paul's conduct or his way of life, his style, his manner of living. That is, he's saying, I've backed up what I've preached with what I've practiced.

[7 : 35] I haven't said one thing and did another, done another. So my own life, he says, is consistent with what I've preached. Timothy has been an observer of that.

But in particular, Paul is still contrasting himself with the false teachers. They have sought to manipulate people with their teaching. But Paul, by claiming here, you've seen my teaching and my conduct, is distancing himself from that.

He's not into the business of manipulation, but rather he lives what he preaches, which is the truth of the gospel. He goes on then to say, you've also observed my aim in life, my purpose or *raison d'etre*, in a sense, for being a Christian minister.

He's a minister or apostle to the Gentiles. He's on about preaching the gospel of Christ far and wide in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean world. You've seen that, Timothy.

You've seen what's driven me. That is, it's not personal gain, but rather the spread of the gospel. Also, Timothy, you've observed my faith, my faith in Christ, but in particular, I think, his faith through thick and thin, through good times and bad, through many cases of hardship.

[8 : 49] You've also observed my patience, he says. The word's got a stronger sense of just being patient, waiting for something to happen. It's the patience of endurance, of hardship.

Long-suffering is perhaps an old-fashioned way of translating this word. Again, it's got the context of long-suffering patience under attack, or persecution from others.

That is, Timothy has observed that Paul's faith is not just sort of on the crest of a wave with all the prosperity and the goodness and the ease. That seems to be what the false teachers were preaching about, distancing themselves from Paul in prison.

But Paul says, my faith has been tested and purified, in a sense, under the crucible or in the crucible of hardship, persecution. And he's kept going.

Timothy, you've also seen my love, my love for others, that is, implied. And that's in contrast to the people we saw two weeks ago who were described as lovers of themselves, lovers of wealth, and lovers of pleasure.

[9 : 51] Paul's love has been a love for others and also, I guess, love for God. Timothy has observed that in Paul's life. And then he says at the end of verse 10, you've observed my steadfastness, his perseverance, his endurance.

Because the Christian life is a marathon. It requires not only beginning well, but continuing well through all the pain of running a marathon, which I've never dared to even try.

It's hard enough running from the kitchen to my study to answer the phone sometimes. Paul is saying here that he has persevered through the pain of running, in effect, a long Christian race.

will see in two weeks he will say, I've run my race. His life is coming towards an end. His ministry is coming towards an end. He has been steadfast and endured through that.

And Timothy has observed that. He's not veered off into new and improved formulae for the gospel, but he's persevered steadfastly in the same true gospel. And then the list continues in verse 11.

[11 : 02] My persecutions and suffering the things that have happened to me. It's not been an easy life and it's not been an easy ministry and Timothy has observed that Paul has not buckled under pressure.

He mentions three places. Antioch, all of these are in southern central Turkey. Antioch, mentioned in Acts 13, he was driven out by persecutors there. In Acts 14, when he was in Iconium, they attempted to stone him, but he escaped from the city.

And then later in the same chapter, Acts 14, in Lystra, Timothy's own hometown, it seems, he was stoned and left for dead. Though, of course, he didn't die, but recovered and gradually regained strength and fled the city again.

Now, they were all three cases early in Paul's ministry, about perhaps 15, maybe a little bit more than that, years before these words were written. So he's going way back to, in fact, the time probably when Timothy first was associated with St Paul.

They're not the only times Paul was persecuted. There were many others. But by referring to the early examples, what I think Paul is making clear to Timothy is that he has indeed been steadfast and patient, long-suffering, through a long period of ministry and a long period of opposition and persecution, almost to the point of death at times.

[12 : 23] But, he says at the end of verse 11, the Lord rescued me from all of them. Not meaning that he stopped the stones hitting him, but rather that he preserved his life.

He suffered. He suffered persecution several times, but God spared his life, the Lord spared his life each time, keeping him alive for further ministry. Now, remember what Paul is saying here.

It's not a boast about himself. He's exhorting Timothy to keep on and persevere in Christian faith despite the pressure and hardship that is being applied to him by false teachers in Ephesus and their adherents.

Paul's example, which Timothy has observed for many years, is encouragement to him to continue to do that. Paul goes on to make a general principle. It's not just he who has suffered persecution for the gospel, but in fact every Christian who seeks to live a godly life, he says in verse 12, will be persecuted.

Now, those words echo words of Jesus several times. Christians who seek to live a godly life ought to expect persecution. We probably should actually feel a little bit uncomfortable about that, I think, because in our day and age we aren't persecuted much, though there is some, and growing, I think.

[13 : 47] We ought to wonder whether there's a reason why we're not being persecuted. Maybe giving God thanks that we're not, but maybe it's because we're not actually striving as we ought to bear witness to Christ and live the godly lives we ought.

Jesus said, and Paul here echoes those words, that Christians seeking to live a godly life will be persecuted. We ought not to be self-congratulatory to think that we're not being persecuted today.

Indeed, Paul expects things to get worse. In verse 13 he says, but wicked people and imposters will go from bad to worse. Again, maybe mocking their sense of progress is in effect saying they'll progress not towards good or better and improved gospels, but rather they'll go from bad to worse, deceiving others and even themselves being deceived.

As they teach falsehood, they themselves become blind to the truth and deceive themselves indeed. Perhaps the hardest place to run a marathon is from in front.

They certainly say that in a cycle race the hardest place to be is in front. You get into people's sort of tailwind or whatever if you're behind them. But there's a sense, I guess, when you're running a long race or cycling a long race or doing something that requires endurance and even some physical pain and suffering, to have someone in front is a spur to keep going, a motivation to keep running the race.

[15 : 13] And in effect, that's what Paul is doing for Timothy here. He's saying in effect, I'm running this marathon race through hardship and persecution steadfastly and patiently. Follow my example.

Follow after me is what Paul is in effect saying to Timothy. For Timothy, Paul is his front runner, the one who should be spurring and motivating him on to persevere.

And that's why Paul has elaborated on his own example of ministry here. Now, generally speaking, I think all Christians benefit from the example and the motivation of others who've in effect gone before them, older and mature Christians.

Chris Mitchell was saying yesterday at the men's breakfast how years ago he was involved in mentoring new Christians and discipling them in their faith, setting them on firm foundations for Christian life.

And how years later he's come across sometimes accidentally some of those whom he mentored in their early Christian lives who are now mature Christians involved in Christian leadership and ministry.

[16 : 18] Probably we need to do more of that as Christians here where older and mature Christians who've gone through and their faith has been strengthened through difficulties and long years of Christian faith and service ought to be perhaps a bit more responsible for taking under their wing younger, less mature Christians who are just beginning the Christian life, helping them, praying for them, mentoring them so that they too will continue on in the Christian gospel.

Too many young Christians give up the Christian faith and one of the reasons that may be is through lack of mentoring and mentoring relationships from older, mature Christians.

Christians. So that's the first argument for Timothy continuing and persevering in the truth that he's heard. That's what Paul says in verse 14, but as for you, continue in what you've learned and firmly believed.

And the first example that's spurred him for that is Paul's own example. That's I think what he's referring to at the end of verse 14, knowing from whom you learned it, from me. But not just Paul because the second part of the argument here, and this verse is sort of transitional from Paul's example to what the example of what Timothy has been taught from childhood, taught probably by his mother and his grandmother who were referred to back in chapter 1, verse 5, and now it goes into an argument about the place of the scriptures for keeping Timothy going in Christian faith and ministry.

Paul goes on in verse 15 to say, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings, the scriptures, that is, or what we would call the Old Testament.

[18 : 10] So firstly, there was the example of Paul, now the example of what Timothy's been taught from childhood, namely the sacred writings or the scriptures and presumably taught by his mother and grandmother.

Now notice here that the reason for Timothy continuing in what he was taught from childhood is not because he was taught it from childhood. There are plenty of people who get taught rubbish in their childhood.

They should abandon that. The reason Timothy is to continue in what he was taught from childhood is because what he was taught in childhood was the scriptures and it's because of the scriptures that Timothy's to continue.

So the emphasis is not just continue on what was taught in childhood, the emphasis is continue in the scriptures. They were taught to you from childhood, continue in that teaching.

Now again, the contrast is with the false teachers. Back in verses 6 and 7, the false teachers were trying to manipulate women, but they were unable to lead them into the truth because they were false teachers in part.

[19 : 13] Timothy though, by holding fast to the scriptures or the sacred writings, will actually come to the truth of salvation because, Paul goes on in verse 15 to say, the sacred writings are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

That's why he's to continue in them because the scriptures lead to salvation by faith in Christ Jesus and that's why Timothy is to continue in them.

Now notice then why they're so important because the scriptures are God's means for leading people to be saved by faith in Jesus Christ.

The old translation would have making us wise for salvation. Not because we're saved by being wise people, but wisdom in the Bible, in the Old Testament in particular, begins with the fear of the Lord, a right relationship with God.

Now Paul, I think, has expanded on that Old Testament idea that the wise person is fearful of the Lord and therefore on the path to salvation by saying the scriptures make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

[20 : 27] That is, he fills out what the fear of the Lord ultimately is about. It's about faith in Christ Jesus. Now this is an important verse. It's an important verse because what Paul's referring to here are fundamentally what we would call the Old Testament.

We could readily say, oh, the New Testament is there to tell us about salvation in Christ Jesus. True. But Paul is saying the same about the Old Testament. And too many Christians think, oh, the Old Testament is sort of old, ancient history and it's sort of background but it's a bit irrelevant.

The New Testament is where we learn about Jesus and salvation by faith in him. Paul says, you've got the Old Testament wrong if that's what you think. Because both Old Testament and New Testament are about making us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

And there's far too much Old Testament teaching and Old Testament scholarship around that completely divorces the Old Testament from Jesus Christ. But it's also true what Paul says.

A friend of mine, the chap who led our Israel trip in Israel last year or a bit over a year ago, was one who had read the Old Testament and through that had come to faith in Christ Jesus.

[21 : 43] A man who was Jewish by background but it's through reading the Old Testament that he was actually led to salvation by faith in Christ Jesus. It's also important because this is telling us what the purpose of the Bible is.

The purpose of the Bible is not to give us a history lesson. It's not to give us lots of answers to trivial pursuit questions. It's not inspiring literature to form the basis of, you know, Shakespeare and all sorts of other famous literature and quotes.

It's not an entertainment and it's not a secret code. It's not something there to confuse us. It's not something there to gather dust on a shelf. The purpose of the Bible is to lead people to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

That's why we have it. Now Paul elaborates on that in three points in verses 16 and 17. He talks about the origin of Scripture, the function of Scripture and its goal.

The origin he refers to at the beginning of verse 16. All Scripture is inspired by God. Now the word inspired there is one that's been contested a lot but literally it means God-breathed or God-spirited.

[22 : 54] That is, it's referring to the fact that Scripture, the Bible as we have it, in particular referring here to the Old Testament but I think it's fair to say for us the whole Bible, is breathed from God, that is, spoken by God.

It's God's word, fundamentally. That's not to deny there were human authors involved in different ways and their own emphases or ways of expression are here and there found but ultimately the source of the Bible is God's mouth.

He breathed these words. The word inspired is a little bit, I think, weak because I think too often we confuse the statement that the Bible's inspired with the idea that the Bible is inspiring like Mozart is inspiring and Beethoven's inspiring or a great book of literature is inspiring.

That's not what we mean here. Rather we mean that it is God-spoken, God-breathed in effect and the point that Paul is making here is that that applies to what we would call the Old Testament as well, I think, in the end as the New Testament.

He's saying that all Scripture is God-breathed from beginning to end. That is why, I guess, we should see in every page God speaking to us.

[24 : 06] That's why we take reading the Bible seriously. Last weekend I was speaking in Canberra, as many of you know, for CMS and one clergyman who I discovered had been ordained 18 years at least had the courage to tell me, I was doing Bible studies on the book of Esther, had the courage to tell me that he had never read the book of Esther Now, I thought at first he meant that he'd never studied it or preached on it but he'd actually never read it and I must say I was flabbergasted.

I said to him, you've never read it. That is, don't you read the Bible every year or two? This is a Christian minister I'm talking about. I mean, I think every Christian after a few years should have read the whole Bible but this is a minister who somehow has never even read the book of Esther and I must say I'm still rather speechless by that but then it is Canberra not Melbourne, so.

Too many Christians and ministers for that matter have a weak view of the Bible but when we realise this is God-breathed words for us I think it's incumbent upon us to read it at least.

Well, secondly, Paul mentions the function of Scripture and he uses four words at the end of verse 16 to describe this. He says, All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful or full of use full of profit for four things teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness.

They're two pairs in effect. Teaching is teaching the truth about God, faith, salvation, doctrine, etc. It's about belief. Rebuking, the second of those or reproof, the second of those words is about exposing wrong belief, ticking off wrong belief or correcting theological error or heresy.

[25 : 55] They go together, a positive and a negative and they're about belief as I say. And remember, of course, the context Timothy's in is of false teachers. So it's very clear that Paul is saying to him in the context of false teaching, Scripture is there to teach the truth and also to reprove or rebuke error.

The second pair also go together, this time the negative and then the positive. Correction has to do with behaviour rather than belief, to do with morals or ethics.

And the last word, training in righteousness, has also to do with behaviour teaching the positive side of correction, of wrong behaviour. So we have here that the function of Scripture is to provide the right or positive teaching about belief and behaviour as well as the correction of wrong belief and wrong behaviour.

And in the end, the two go together. Right belief and right behaviour are flip sides in the end of the same coin. And Scripture has the function for both of those two things.

Unlike the false teachers and their adherence of the beginning of this chapter, they sat loosely, it seems, with the truth of the gospel. They came with a new and improved gospel, but it actually didn't lead into right belief because Paul has said, say in verse 7, that they don't arrive at a knowledge of the truth, but it also leads into wrong behaviour.

[27 : 20] And remember that long list in verses 2 to 5 of all those things that the false teachers and their adherence were practising. Right belief issues in right behaviour, hand in hand, and they are the fruit of God breathing the words of Scripture.

So Paul then summarises the goal of Scripture, which builds on what he's just said at the end of verse 16 when he says in verse 17, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

That is, the goal of Scripture is a practical goal, that Christians are equipped for every good work. That will involve right belief and right behaviour.

In particular though, the expression that's translated here everyone who belongs to God is literally the expression the man of God. Now our Bible translation has tried to de-sex, de-genderise or whatever the Scriptures and often does that well and here in one sense it's fair enough, but in particular the expression man of God is often used in the Old Testament to refer to a Christian leader like Moses or David or Elijah.

So maybe here in particular Paul is saying the goal of Scripture in particular for a leader, although every Christian it applies to, is to be equipped for every good work in ministry.

[28 : 47] Now there's one other little thing about the translation here that's worth pointing out. Everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, it says, but the word literally has got the sense of completeness and where I think our translation is slightly deficient is to say what Paul is saying here is that Scripture is sufficient for equipping us for every good work.

That is, it's not just a useful tool for helping us to live every good work and do every good work, but it is sufficient to make us completely equipped. We could say that Scripture is completely useful to make us completely equipped to do every good work.

That is, we don't need anything else. God's Scriptures for us are totally sufficient for us getting right belief and right behaviour, thus doing every good work that is required of us.

That is, God has said all he needs to say in Scripture. We don't need the Bible and a new and improved package. The Bible is sufficient for us being found before God, equipped for every good work with right belief and right behaviour.

That is, there's no new, improved, advanced, or progressive gospel to be found. Any distortion or so-called improvement is actually regressive in the end, both in theology and in practice.

[30 : 15] Well, that, I guess, is why we try and take the Bible so seriously here. Too many churches don't. But why I take sermons seriously, why we encourage people to be in a Bible study group, why we encourage you to read the whole Bible through in this current year at least, is because God's word breathed for us has this practical purpose.

Nothing else will make us totally equipped for doing every good work except the scriptures that God has given to us. Nothing else will lead us to salvation by faith in Christ other than what God said to us in the words of scripture from beginning to end.

So then, if you want to overcome error and to grow in truth, then the scriptures are where you should turn to. If you want to overcome sin and grow in holiness, the scriptures are where you ought to turn to.

Nothing else is sufficient for those goals of overcoming error and evil and growing in truth and holiness. But at the same time, be prepared because not only will you be taught and trained in righteousness, positive things, but there will be a sense of reproof and correction as well.

and that's much harder to take but just as necessary. Let's pray. God, we thank you that you have breathed and spoken to us and for us the words of scripture from the book of Genesis to the book of Revelation and that they are there so that we may be wise for salvation in Christ Jesus by faith, equipped for doing every good work.

[31 : 53] we pray that we may so treasure your words to us that we may indeed be completely equipped for every work and wise for salvation by faith in Christ.

Amen.