



# The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2004  
by Mark Ashton

10p

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2 Timothy 3:1-9

## The Last Days

### Introduction: The Last Days

Do you remember how Charles Dickens began the only historical novel he ever wrote? *A Tale of Two Cities* starts like this:

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.*

In other words, every age of human history tends to think of itself in exaggerated terms; so when we read 2 Timothy 3:1 – ***‘But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days’*** – we hear it as saying that things are going to be very bad before the end of time; and we wonder if the terribleness of our own day means we are very close to that end? But that phrase, ‘in the last days’ is actually something of a technical expression in the New Testament. It means all of time after the resurrection of Jesus Christ until the end of time. And during that period (which is this period), according to 2 Timothy 3:1, there will be some times of particular stress. So, Paul is not denying that there will also be times of religious revival. But in the wonderful gospel age in which we live, with the opportunity for every human being to hear about Jesus, there will come times of great difficulty for believers. And it is the nature of that difficulty, rather than its timing, which interested Paul. So, this chapter is not so much about what the future may hold, as about the relationship between human nature and religion. In fact, it concerns the contrast between religion derived from the world of men, and faith based on the word of God. We need to hold the whole chapter together to see the contrast Paul is making, but this week we will only have time for the first point, in verses 2-9, and a preliminary glance at the second. Next week we will do the rest.

### 1. A Religion Derived from the World of Men (vv. 2-9)

We have, first, this ferocious vice list in verses 2-4: ***‘People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, <sup>3</sup>without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, <sup>4</sup>treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God ....’*** Far too extreme, we think, to be us. Indeed, the fact that they are religious at all comes as rather a shock: ***‘...having a form of godliness but denying its power’*** (v. 5). Paul is not saying that the whole of society is like this, nor that any one individual is like all of this. But that this is the way human nature goes when it is governed by the three loves at the beginning and end of the list – ***‘... lovers of themselves, lovers of money, ... lovers of pleasure rather***

*than lovers of God.*' Self, wealth, pleasure – three great obsessions of human society. And when we derive our religion from our culture, what society loves will be what the church loves. It will try to meet people's needs. That is what the self always wants – to have its needs met. So whatever your needs were as you came to St Andrew the Great this evening, the important thing about this gathering will be how much it meets those needs of yours (or mine). And lovers of money – surely not, we think. We Brits are pretty subtle about money, of course, and we would never allow the pursuit of money to be flagrant in our church life, but it may still be there. As Chris Green comments on this passage, *'We like our conference centres to be converted English country houses, and our pastors to have accents that come from expensive private education.'* And lovers of pleasure – so that, if the music in a particular church does not please me, I move to one where it does.

But a church made up of people like that will never know the power of godliness – *'having a form of godliness but denying its power'* (v. 5) – because they present no contrast to the culture at all. We are just as obsessed with self, money and pleasure as unbelievers are. No-one can notice a difference – so we're just as desperate to live in the right catchment areas for the best schools, and to have the right decor in our lounges, and to be upwardly mobile in our careers, and to have good holidays. Where does the unbeliever see the love of God in our lives? Or does he only see the same loves he knows from his own life (self, wealth, pleasure), and also little hints of so many of those other things on Paul's list in verses 2-4? Perhaps we are not quite as far from what Paul is describing as we might like to think. *'The misplaced loves of the church are the cause of everything else that goes wrong'* (Chris Green).

But Paul's main point to Timothy is that these false teachers, with whom Timothy is to have nothing to do, are the product of their society. While the gospel confronts the behaviour in verses 2-4; the false teachers compromise with it and indeed conform to it! They reflect its values and meet its needs. Their preaching is man-centred. It may be very popular, but it is not spiritually powerful because it is conformed to human behaviour. *'They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him'* (Titus 1:16).

Only the gospel can change the human nature described in verses 2-4. And those who tailor their religion to the culture cannot proclaim a counter-cultural gospel faithfully.

But, if they do not know *that* power, they do pursue other forms of power – *'They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires'* (v. 6). They are manipulative. They target the vulnerable with the techniques of the door-to-door salesman, trying to gain control over easy prey. Gospel work must be done in a gospel way – which can never be deceitful or manipulative. We don't send the church staff out in the afternoons to seek out the vulnerable. But we should beware of youth or children's ministry which relies more on emotional excitement than on gospel content. I thank God for the seriousness with which our Trekkers, Pathfinders and Travs leaders seek to teach the Bible. And another example would be how we must try to engage with whole families and not just target children, as it were, behind their parents' backs. True gospel ministry cannot be manipulative. These teachers were.

If they were manipulative, they were also speculative: *'... always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth'* (v. 7). How our age loves learning! More and more education, yet another qualification, one more college course, learning for its own sake, which is all very well in the realm of the intellect, but all very dangerous in the realm of the spirit. We don't want it to touch our lives on the street, in the lab, in the library, in the office, at home... I don't want to actually have to talk to my neighbour about Christ. I want to know a lot more about Christ, but I don't want to speak about Him in a way that would make me look foolish. Always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth. An open mind is like an open mouth – the necessary prelude to closing it on something. We don't walk around all day with our mouths open, so every wasp and bluebottle can fly in; nor should we live our lives with our minds so open that anything can get into them and nothing can stay in them. It is said that on the way to heaven there is a fork in the road with a signpost – one sign points to 'Heaven', the other to

'Discussion on Heaven'... and all the students go to the discussion.

But if these teachers' methods are manipulative and their teaching speculative, they are also wrong. ***'Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth – men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected'*** (v. 8). Jannes and Jambres were the names (according to Jewish tradition) of the magicians at Pharaoh's court who opposed Moses when he came to request the Israelites' freedom, and who mimicked the first two plagues of blood and frogs but were defeated by the gnats. By mentioning them Paul reminds us that human opposition to God's work has a long, long history; and he also equates Timothy and himself with Moses. What Moses stood for, they were standing for, and some men opposed it, just as they do today. ***'But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone'*** (v. 9).

The verdict of history is clear. False teaching comes and goes. It is always around in some form or other, and it is always changing its shape – Montanism, Donatism, Arianism, Gnosticism – but the gospel remains the same. So far as I am able to, I try to teach exactly the same truths to you today as Paul taught to Timothy 2,000 years ago. At many points since those truths have been overshadowed by false teaching in many different guises. The same may happen at many points in the future. But the gospel will always emerge unscathed. The same simple truths will go on saving men and women in God's own way. All sorts of falsehoods will come and go (and some return again and again). But the gospel plods on. False teaching will be exposed by the passing of time: ***'... they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone.'*** And the same gospel that saved Paul and Timothy has proved itself in every generation since by saving others – in 1968 me, and at some point I hope you.

***'But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days'*** (v. 1). But the more terrible the time, the more clearly the gospel shines. There is no other way back to God, than by the death of His Son for our sins in our place on the cross. And there will always be some men and women who have been saved by that and who stand for an entirely different set of values from the surrounding culture.

That is why Paul moves from verses 1-9 to verses 10-17. I'm calling it:

## **2. A Faith Based on the Word of God.**

But before getting on to the Bible, Paul sets before Timothy a stark contrast to the pattern of unbelief in verses 2-9. He reminds Timothy of the significant believers in Timothy's life. First, there is Paul himself, in verses 11-12: ***'You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, <sup>11</sup>persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.'*** Then he reemphasises the contrast, in verses 12-13: ***'In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, <sup>13</sup>while evil men and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.'*** Then he mentions Timothy's believing family, in verses 14-15: ***'But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup>and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.'*** 'You know those from whom you learned it' – the lives of the false teachers betrayed them; the lives of Paul and Timothy's family confirmed the gospel.

There are models of belief and unbelief for us all. Don't be surprised: there will be terrible times, times when it is hard to believe ('the best of times, the worst of times'). But do be discerning. Not just discerning about the truth of Scripture, but about the lives of the people around you. Decide whom you will adhere to, whom you will conform to.

Back in the summer of 1968, I'd been a Christian a few months. And during that summer I was overwhelmed with doubt that the Christian faith was not true. That I was fooling myself that anything had happened to me when I had asked Jesus into my heart. That there was no truth in Christianity. But I can remember one very vivid thing that helped me enormously at that time. I had met, for the first time in my life, a group of believing people, the friends at university who were talking to me about Christ. And I remember thinking to myself vividly during those summer months, "I have never experienced a quality of friendship, and love, and commitment to one another that I have experienced among this group. And even if this Christianity is not true, I am going to go on pretending it is, for the sake of staying with this group. Because there is something about them that I haven't experienced anywhere else in my life in terms of human relationships." I don't know if that rings any bells with you. Maybe you're not yet a believer, and you're thinking, "Do the Christians around me show that?" Well, keep asking that question. Keep talking to them. Keep thinking about the gospel. There is excitement and enthusiasm in other groups, but not the love of God made manifest here on this earth.

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*