



The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 29th February 2004
by Mark Ashton

10p

2 Timothy 3:10-17

But As For You

We have been looking at this chapter in 2 Timothy as a whole; and I was asked after last week's sermon, when I shared some of my doubts during my first year as a Christian, whether I'm still unconvinced of the truth of Christianity today and just sort of 'hanging in there' for the sake of the company, 36 years later. Well, I hope we're going to end in a rather more satisfactory position than we ended last week, as we complete the chapter this week. But let's first remember where it began.

1. Denying the power of godliness – *the iniquity of the disobedient* (verses 1-9)

'...having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them' (v. 5). There are forms of false religion that have no power to change the lives of those who follow them. They just put a religious cloak over the worst of normal human behaviour. They may pay lip service to the Bible, but they use it in a way that does not transform behaviour.

Timothy is told to recognise this, and to shun the people responsible (in those first 9 verses of the chapter). Just as an enemy spy may be far more dangerous than an enemy foot soldier, so false religion can be far more dangerous than no religion at all: *'having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.'*

But if there are those Timothy has to shun, to have nothing to do with, there are also those he is to follow.

2. Knowing those from whom you learned – *the integrity of believers* (vv. 10-14)

This is where we are really going to start our focus today. *'You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra [Timothy's home town], the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹²In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it'* (vv. 10-14).

All of us are influenced by the people we spend our time with, and by the people we look up to. And the Bible tells us to choose those people wisely, because there is more of the chameleon in all of us than we might like to think. *'You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹persecutions, 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'* (vv. 10, 11). Paul is not pointing to himself as a wonderful example of moral virtue. But he is saying that there was an observable consistency in him – between what he taught: *'You, however, know all about my teaching,'* the way he lived:

'my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance,' and then what happened to him: *'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.'* Remember that the Lord's rescue of Paul was not a triumphalist vindication and an experience of empowered liberty. Paul was writing from prison. But he knew he was being kept to do God's will. That's God's rescue. He rescues us to do His will. So, Paul's doctrine (what he taught), his lifestyle (the way he lived), and his sufferings (what happened to him) are all linked; and they are all consistent with a particular pattern – the pattern established by Jesus' own life and death: the One who said to His followers, **“All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved”** (Matthew 10:22). That is the pattern of the gospel. And Timothy could see it in Paul; Paul is inviting him to see it in him. Paul taught something that changed his behaviour (the way he lived his life) and that changed his destiny. It had given his life purpose.

And I guess if we are Christian believers we are bound to ask ourselves whether that pattern is discernable in us. If I claim to be a Christian today (and I know not all of us here do), could I say this about myself: 'You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings'? Is there that consistency, that integrity about my life?

Now, I claim to be a supporter of Liverpool Football Club, but I'm not a true follower, it has to be said. It's more just to balance certain other sporting allegiances on the staff team: and I can't even pronounce the names of all the Liverpool players. I usually have to rely on Chris Lane to keep me up-to-date with the results – and he does it with some relish if Liverpool haven't done particularly well (especially if they have done badly against Middlesbrough). Anyone who knows anything about the Premier League can tell I am not the real thing as a Liverpool supporter. How much more obvious must it be if our following of Jesus is not real? Are we deceiving ourselves – deceiving and being deceived (as verse 13 calls it)? I fear some might be. When it comes to Christianity, am I actually an impostor? There should be a recognisable pattern to it; and it's the pattern set out there for us: ***'In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived'*** (vv. 12, 13). True Christian teaching will be changing life, changing behaviour; and it will lead to being disliked: not to popularity and power, but to what Paul calls persecution. It is not that persecution is a necessary and a certain indication of being a Christian. I think it is more that Paul is saying that the more we try to live God's way in this world the more we will find ourselves in conflict with the world's values and attitudes and behaviour. While false teaching will go the other way: the way of moral deterioration and increasing deception: ***'...evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived'*** (v. 13). Well, I want to plead with you now: don't be self-deceived about your religion.

And Paul was not the only example of this pattern for Timothy to consider. Let's go on to verses 14 and 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, ¹⁵and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.'*** Paul hadn't been around from Timothy's infancy, so clearly this is a reference not just to Paul, but (as we know from the first chapter) Timothy had a believing grandmother, called Lois, and a believing mother, called Eunice. From his infancy Timothy had been brought up in the faith; and Paul is encouraging him to reflect on that process – both on the integrity of those in his family who had taught Timothy to believe: ***'because you know those from whom you learned it'***, and on the way Timothy has proved the truth of Christianity in his own experience as he has grown up. Look at it again: ***'But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of...'*** Did you notice that? There will be some of us here who cannot look back to a day on which we were converted, because we grew up in believing families, and can never remember a day, perhaps, when we didn't believe in God. And what a blessing to praise God for! But it will be important that we have become convinced of that faith in our own experience, at each stage of our development as we've grown up.

If a child set off for secondary school with a comfort blanket in his hand and a dummy in his mouth, parents might be worried. Even more so if he set off for university like that! But there are certainly students who turn up at university every year with a five-year-old Sunday School faith. No change in life stage is ever spiritually

neutral: if our faith does not grow up and develop at every life stage, it will eventually wither and die.

I want to ask: are there some here who are trying to live, as teenagers perhaps, on a Sunday School faith? If you're honest, it hasn't really changed. Or perhaps as a student with a teenage CYFA camp faith – those mid-teen years of enthusiasm which you remember so well. Or perhaps, as an adult now, on a student faith from your CU days. You won't survive like that. You can't take a bachelor or a spinster faith into marriage and survive – it has to grow up. You can't take a dinky faith into parenting – it won't last. Maybe it's time to upgrade, high time perhaps, and to make Jesus Lord of the present circumstances of my life, and of my current life-stage, by becoming convinced of the faith for myself, as I am now at this point in my life. *'But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it'* (v. 14).

Now, notice it wasn't the attractive characters of Lois and Eunice that drew Timothy to Christ. It was their teaching him the Scriptures. Verse 14 is followed by verse 15: *'...and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.'* At the end of the day we have a more solid basis for our confidence as Christians than merely the example of those who helped us to believe. They may have kept me going (as I was saying last week) during that dark hour of doubt in my first months as a believer. But as time went on I discovered a more sure basis for confidence. And Paul is quite clear that there are false teachers whom Timothy must avoid, and true believers from whom he can draw strength and encouragement in the faith, but that Timothy's faith itself was grounded in the unshakeable word of God.

3. Able to make wise for salvation – the inspiration of the Bible (verses 15-17)

'...and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.' (vv. 15-17)

(a) The origin of Scripture – from God to us.

All Scripture is God-breathed. That's the central statement of these verses. Notice that the focus here is on the origin of Scripture: where (or rather Who) it comes from. It's not on some quality that attaches to Scripture in its finished form. I don't know how often you may have heard somebody from this pulpit (if you're a regular here) say that our God is a speaking God. And yet so often we catch ourselves thinking about the Bible as though God were an incompetent speaker, an incompetent communicator: perhaps He got it more or less right to begin with, but He has allowed it to get hopelessly confused and garbled along the way. So we now need the helpful mediation of well-meaning human beings to make His truth clear to us today. We need scholars and theologians and Bible commentators. But if God is a speaking God, then He must be a quite good at speaking: in fact He must be the best speaker there's ever been – if He's God and He speaks. He must be the perfect communicator. I understand that the management gurus tell us that in communication responsibility lies with the communicator. I think we can expect God to fulfil His responsibility to us. I think He can speak to you and to me today absolutely clearly. And I think He has.

Do you remember the story of the elderly parishioner who got converted late in life, and his vicar gave him a Bible commentary to help him catch up: to make up for lost time in Bible study? After a few weeks the vicar asked the old man how he was getting on with the Bible commentary. He said, "Well, it certainly is a hard book, a very hard book. But I do find the Bible sheds some light on it." God is an effective speaker to you and to me. We mustn't let men silence Him, by trying to come between us and His word in the Scriptures.

Think of the assaults there have been on the Bible in the last 250 years, and remember Paddy's brick wall. Paddy's neighbours kept pushing his wall over, and so eventually Paddy built it six feet high and eight feet

thick. When they asked him why he'd done that he said, "So that the next time that they push it over, it will be higher than it was before." Higher than it was before: the Bible has grown stronger for all human attempts to emasculate it, to discredit it. 250 years of scholarly criticism has not diminished its power today. Those who say, for example, "Of course we agree that the Bible is authoritative: it's just that we can't be absolutely clear what it means." Well, unless God is incompetent we can know what it means. It does speak clearly to us of all that we need to know. Some things Bible-believing Christians are genuinely not clear on, we don't need to know them. If Bible-believing Christians disagree on something then we don't need to know. What is the right age to baptise? We don't need to know it.

Look again at verse 15: '*...the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*' Lois and Eunice could not save Timothy, but the gospel message in Scripture could. The focus, as we have seen, is on the origin of Scripture (from God/breathed out by God), but it is also on the goal of Scripture.

(b) The goal of Scripture – to save and to equip.

It's like an arrow. I don't know if you have ever had an arrow fired at you. You probably haven't, but I want you to imagine that you have (it's a silly illustration, but let's run with it for a moment). There are two things you want to know: (i) what damage has it done – has it hit me? (ii) where did it come from – who fired it at me? The thing you are not interested in is the exact trajectory of its flight from there to you. The Bible is like that: we need to know about its impact and we need to know about its origin. Bible scholarship concentrates on the trajectory of the flight too much of the time. Think of the Bible in those terms: its origin and its impact. Its impact is to save us (v. 15) and to equip us (verses 16 and 17): '*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,*' (v. 16). Those words concern our minds and our lives – the Bible will tell us how to think and how to live; and how *not* to think and how *not* to live.

'*...so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*' (v. 17). The Bible will equip us to serve. So many folk in this world set out to serve God without stopping to ask, "What does God want me to do?" (as if God were a silent God and hadn't said to us anything about how to serve Him in His world) without listening to His word and letting it tell us what to do and how to do it. I don't know if you've ever left written instructions for someone which they've paid no attention to at all. You know the sort of thing that happens at home: 'Please put the casserole in the oven at gas mark 5, at 6.00pm.' You get home. No supper. You summon your son or flatmate or spouse: "Did you read it?" "Yes." "Did you understand it?" "Yes." "Well, why didn't you do it?" "Oh! I didn't think you really meant it," or "Oh, I wanted to watch the Simpsons, and I forgot," or "Oh, somebody told me that we could get food from Pizza Hut tonight," or "Oh, I just thought I'd ignore it." You see, if God's word was obscure to you and me and hard to discover, it might be different. But it is not.

Paul, as he wrote, was talking primarily here just of the Old Testament – and he said that spoke clearly about salvation. How much easier for you and me with the New Testament: with all the accounts of Jesus' life and teaching that we have. We have a clear word from God – clear in everything we need to know: able to make us wise for salvation; able to equip us for every good work. Let's use it, remembering that our attitude to God's word is actually our attitude to God. I think there are so many of us here today who want to separate those two, and who do not realise that how you treat His word is how you are treating Him. We cannot be taking God seriously if we're treating His word lightly – any more than my flatmate was taking me seriously over the matter of the casserole.

Show me your Bible and I can tell you what you think of God.

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