

Main Idea: In 2 Timothy 3:1-5, Paul provides us with practical help for living in terrible times. Here God helps us come to grips with three key issues.

- I. Here’s the proper reaction to terrible times (1).
 - A. We mustn’t be surprised.
 - B. We must know the times.
- II. Here’s the proper recognition of terrible times (2-5a).
 - A. In terrible times society has a sin problem.
 1. Here are the personal traits (2a).
 2. Here are the interpersonal traits (2b-4).
 3. Here are the religious traits (5a).
 - B. In terrible times society has a love problem.
 1. People love self (2).
 2. People love money (2).
 3. People don’t really love other people (3a).
 4. People don’t love what is good (3b).
 5. People love pleasure (4).
 6. People fail to love God (4).
- III. Here’s the proper response to terrible times (5b).
 - A. We must be distinct from the world.
 - B. We must make Christ known to the world.

The Bottom Line: In times like these be very sure your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock.

Scripture Reading: 2 Timothy 3:1-5

There will be terrible times in the last days.

That’s what Paul told his friend and fellow soldier of Jesus by the name of Timothy nearly two thousand years ago. Terrible times are coming There *will* be, he said.

Are these the terrible times Paul had in mind? They certainly are stressful times, and especially perilous for the committed Christian. Society is growing increasingly secular. There is rising hostility towards fundamental, evangelical Christian whom society describes as naive, closeminded, outdated, out of touch with reality, and even a hindrance to modern thinking.

You don't need me to tell you this. You know it all too well. You read about it in the news, the attacks against Christian freedoms here and against Christians in other places. Yes, you know we're living in stressful times. What you're wondering is this.

What should we do? How should we as Christians respond? We find a very helpful answer to this question in today’s text. In 2 Timothy 3:1-5, Paul provides us with practical counsel for living in terrible times. He says we must come to grips with three key issues.

By way of background, Paul wrote this letter some 35 years after Jesus Christ ascended to heaven, leaving his disciples with the charge to make disciples throughout the world. In the period of just one generation, God used the followers of Christ to shine a bright light all over the darkness of the mighty Roman Empire.

And Satan did not sit idly by, but organized his Christ-hating forces. In AD 64, the Evil One used the wicked pawn Nero, to instigate vicious persecution against Christians. Three years later, Paul faced his execution, and would eventually be beheaded. Yes, says Paul, there will be terrible times.

*** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

When Paul wrote his last inspired letter to Timothy, this primary theme gripped the apostle's mind and heart, THE GOSPEL of Jesus Christ. Paul charged Timothy (and us) to do four things with the gospel.

Chapter 1--Protect the gospel (1:14).

Chapter 2--Participate and even suffer for the gospel (2:3, 8, 9).

Chapter 3--Persevere in the gospel (3:13, 14).

Chapter 4--Proclaim the gospel (4:1-2).

But there's something that makes our privileged task very difficult. What is it? We have an enemy. Who is this enemy?

We meet him as we look back at the verse we left off with last week.

2 Timothy 2:26 "And that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will."

The devil is not idle these days. He is setting traps, and he aims to take captives.

Yes, this opponent is aggressive and active. He is the Prince of the Power of the Air (Eph 2:2). He is the spirit that works in the sons of disobedience (Eph 2:2). He authorizes the rulers of the darkness of this world as well as the spiritual wickedness in high places (Eph 6:12). He has an arsenal of fiery darts which he casts at God's people (Eph 6:16). He markets himself as a deceptive angel of light (2 Cor 11:14).

Now notice the connection between 2 Timothy 2:26 and 3:1. We have an enemy (2:26). Therefore, there will be terrible times (3:1).

So what must we do? Come to grips with three issues, and here's the first.

I. Here's the proper reaction to terrible times (1).

Notice verse 1, "But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days."

How should we react in terrible times? This is so important. "But mark this," he says. In the AV, "This know." That's an imperative, a command. "Timothy, get a handle on this fact."

What fact? "That in the last days perilous times shall come," as the AV puts it.

Paul didn't want Timothy to be blown away by the recent surge of hostility towards Christianity. It was not easy to live for Christ in AD 67. Roman civil authorities stripped legal rights from the followers of Jesus Christ. Christians were blamed for the economic and social problems of Roman society. Nero instituted a hate campaign against Christians. Talk about living in stressful times!

How would you react if you lived in conditions like that?

Look carefully at how Paul told Timothy to react. "But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days."

What are terrible (or, 'perilous') times? The adjective means "hard, difficult, even stressful." John Stott paraphrases, "There will come times of stress."

In classical Greek this word was used of dangerous wild animals, and of the raging sea. The only other time this word appears in the NT is in Matthew 8:28, where it describes the condition of two demon-possessed men as being "violent" (NIV) and "exceedingly fierce" (AV).

Know this, says Paul. In the period of time known as "the last days," there will come the experience of "terrible times." In other words, the last days will bring perilous, fierce, stressful times.

So what's the proper reaction to terrible times? According to God's Word...

A. We mustn't be surprised. We tend to expect peace to be the norm, comfort, good times. But that's the norm for what's coming.

“There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (Rev 21:4).” That’s the new order in the new heavens and earth. The old order? That’s the present age. In the coming age, for the child of God, no death, mourning, crying, or pain. Until then? There will be terrible times.

So we mustn’t be surprised. To the contrary...

B. We must know the times. “But *mark* this.” “This *know*.” The Lord wants us to know and consider what these times will be like.

In Acts 14:22 Paul said he taught new believers, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”

Did we tell that to the person we last led to Christ? We should. It’s a tremendous thing to be a Christian! To know you will spend eternity with your Savior, in experiencing unending joy and peace and adventure and paradise! But now for a brief season, *terrible times*.

There will be terrible times in the last days.

When are the last days? We need to keep something in mind. According to the Bible, we are living in the period known as "the last days." But so was Paul. In fact, when Jesus Christ entered the world two thousand years ago, He inaugurated the "last days." The entire period of time between the Messiah’s first and second coming is known as the "last days."

Read the OT and the prophets will talk about *the present age* and *the age to come*. What would end the *present age* and launch *the age to come*? The Messiah’s coming to earth.

But the mystery is that the Messiah would come *twice*. And the time between His two comings, the time in which Paul lived, and we now live, is called *the last days*.

Hebrews 1:1-2 "God...has in these last days spoken unto us by His Son..."

Acts 2:14-17 On the day of Pentecost, Peter explained the phenomena of the miraculous speaking in others languages by quoting Joel's prophecy, "But this is that which was spoken by Joel...And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh..."

See also: 1 Peter 1:20

Christians in the first century believed that Christ would come in their lifetime. They knew that they were living in the last days, which of course, have now lasted for twenty centuries.

And we too must know. We are living in the last days, perhaps the last of the last days!

So 2 Timothy 3 is not describing a future period, but the present age. Paul's point? "Timothy, don't be shocked at the degraded conditions of society. Don't be surprised at the way God and His people are being mocked. That's the way God said the "last days" would be. As God’s people, we should expect this. And know that it will not last forever. For when the last days come to an end, then comes an age without end, the paradise of the new heaven and earth.

Peter says in 2 Peter 3:3, “Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.”

Jude writes in verse 17-21, “But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. ¹⁸ They said to you, “In **the last times** there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.” ¹⁹ These are the people who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit. ²⁰ But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ keep

yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to **eternal life.**"

This provides a needed caution for two extremes. One, a view of the end times known as post-millennialism, that says that the world will get better and better, and then Messiah will come and establish His kingdom. And two, the "your best life now" theology that seems shocked by suffering in this present age.

How should we react? We need to be like the men of Issachar. Why? Issachar was one of the 12 sons of Jacob, born to Leah. His descendants had earned quite a reputation by the time David was king.

We read concerning the men of Issachar in 1 Chronicles 12:32, "Men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do."

That's what we need too, to know the times. To see the times through the lens of God's Word.

Peter wrote a letter to first century Christians who were facing perilous times. He told them the same thing Paul told Timothy. 1 Peter 4:12 "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to test you, as though some strange thing happened to you."

What fiery trial? This one...

4:14 "If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye..."

4:16 "If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God on this behalf."

4:17 "FOR THE TIME IS COME that judgment must begin at the house of God; and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel?"

So there's the first key issue. Get a grip on the proper reaction to terrible times.

II. Here's the proper recognition of terrible times (2-5a).

What should we recognize about terrible times? From the list that follows in verses 2-5, we learn that in terrible times, society develops two fundamental problems. Let's read the list again, then I'll identify the two problems, and then we'll walk through it again line by line.

Verses 2-5, "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, ⁴ treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— ⁵ having a form of godliness but denying its power."

Here are the two problems, a *sin* problem and a *love* problem.

A. In terrible times society has a sin problem.

In verses 2-5, Paul describes the characteristics of people living in the last days. He wants Timothy to know what people will be like. His list is 20 characteristics long, and it's an ugly list, a sad commentary on the nature of the terrible times there will be.

I've pondered this list trying to see if Paul had any sense of order to it. It's almost a shotgun-blast description of society's sin problem, which shows up in three ways.

1. *Here are the personal traits (2a).* People will be: lovers of self, lovers of money (covetous), boastful, proud, abusive (blasphemers).

2. *Here are the interpersonal traits (2b-4).* People will be: disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

3. *Here are the religious traits (5a).* They have a form of godliness but deny its power.

That's where sin always shows up, personally (in what we are), interpersonally (in how we treat other people), and religiously (in how we treat God).

Let's zero in on the characteristics one at a time, some more carefully than others. Let's take inventory as we do, for this description of society's sin used to be our resume. But we've been rescued by Jesus! He went to the cross to take the penalty for these sins and break their power over us. Then He conquered death to give us a new kind of life.

So this old life now has no place in us. First, the *personal traits* of society's sin problem...

1. **Lovers of themselves** = from the words, "to love" + "self"

This is the key link in the chain that follows. All the rest of the vices hinge on this. The natural man loves himself. When his marriage is in trouble, he thinks of himself. The same goes when there's trouble at work, or on the ball-field, or even at church. *What's best for ME?* Society if full of self-lovers.

This self-love shows up in a very tangible way...

2. **Lovers of money** (AV, covetous, = lit. "to love" + "money") = money lovers Timothy knew this all too well. He lived in Ephesus. Ephesus was called "The Treasure House of the Ancient World," or "The Vanity Fair of Asia Minor." The city was situated on a great trade route. It was prosperous, and its people were materialistic.

3. **Boastful** (AV boasters) = braggarts (originally used to describe wandering quack doctors). This is the person who pretends to have what he doesn't. The know it all.

4. **Proud** = "to show oneself above others". This, of course, is at the heart of all sin. We want our way. We want to put ourselves above others. We believe we know what's best, and we insist on it.

5. **Abusive** (AV 'blasphemers') = love of insult; to slander God or fellow man It's what we hear in the political arena. Mudslinging.

Next comes the interpersonal traits of society's sin, and the first five have to do with family life.

6. **Disobedient to parents.** One of the first areas sin makes its presence known in a society is in the family. Children lose respect for their parents, and then disobey them. Society fosters this by putting parents and kids on the same plane, so that what the child considers to be right has as much say as what the parent thinks (just watch the children's network on television).

7. **Ungrateful** (AV "unthankful"). We live in a very unappreciative age. People forget how indebted they are, first to God, and to others. Especially in America. It really surfaced with the baby boomer generation, then the buster generations. They were ungrateful generations, and now it's spread to their children, and their children.

There aren't too many left, but talk to someone who lived through the great depression, and you'll likely hear someone who appreciates the little things.

8. **Unholy** = without piety or reverence; In terrible times holiness, instead of being commended, is mocked and ridiculed. Personal liberty is promoted. You have the right to do whatever you want as long as you don't hurt somebody else (and sometimes that's okay).

9. **Without love** (AV, 'without natural affection') = unloving. This is an interesting word. Its another compound word. It literally means "without family love". It describes people who no longer have the natural love that families have.

Now there's a contemporary indictment! Over forty years ago our country made it legal for mothers to choose to end the life of their unborn children, and it's been happening at the rate of one million plus per year. The majority of these babies lost their lives because of one basic reason. They weren't wanted. So they were eliminated.

One of the marks of the last days, says Paul, is the absence of family love.

But then the pendulum swings the other way, and then children are worshipped. This too is an indicator that we've lost family love. In God's kind of family, parents love their children enough to discipline them so they know how to function under authority, God's authority first, then other forms of authority, like government, church, teachers', etc.

10. **Unforgiving** (AV, 'trucebreakers') = the word means irreconcilable. It describes a condition in which a person is not even willing to come to the conference table to negotiate. It shows up in partisan politics and a skyrocketing divorce rate.

11. **Slandorous** (AV, 'false accusers', "diabolo") = lit. "like the devil"; slanderers; to pass on a story that ruins someone else's reputation. I think of the tabloids that assault you at the checkout, and for that matter, watching the news on television, or listening on the radio, where there seems to be more attacking and less news. And then in our own conversations, even as God's people, where it's much easier to ruin a reputation than pray.

12. **Without self-control** (AV, 'incontinent) = powerless; lacking in self-control (being controlled by one's passions rather than controlling them)

13. **Brutal** (AV 'fierce) = to be savage; to live like animals

We read these words and they may strike us as odd. Loving brutality is not God's intent for society. That has tremendous implications for us, from the kinds of movies we choose to watch, to the music we listen to, to the way we treat others.

14. **Not lovers of the good** (AV, 'despisers of those that are good') = lit. "without the love of good". A man that despises God will inevitably despise what is good. The one leads to the other, and there's no turning around the slippery slide, not apart from the gospel of God's grace.

Of course, once again, this is our society. It loves and exalts evil. To those that despise good, sin is entertaining. Righteousness is boring and outdated.

15. **Treacherous** (AV, 'traitors') = it's not just that a man's word means nothing, but that if it's to his gain to break his promise, he will delight in doing so, no matter what the cost to others.

16. **Rash** (AV, 'heady') = describes a man who is unable to think sensibly; swept by passion and impulse; reckless

17. **Conceited** (AV, 'high-minded') = swell-headed; one who is inflated with his own importance.

Notice again how many of these words have to do with pride. Sin at its root is pride. We think we know better than God what will be good for us.

18. **Lovers of pleasure** (AV says '**pleasures**') **rather than** (AV says '**more than**') **lovers of God**. Don't misread this. Pleasure is not bad. The Lord created us to enjoy things—food, recreation, work, sex, relationships, hobbies. The problem is not that we love these pleasures. It's when they occupy an illegitimate place in our hearts, when we love them *more than* that which should be our supreme love, *God Himself*.

This phrase certainly indicts our society. We are a pleasure loving society. And here's what is interesting. We love God too. According to a December 2013 study, 72%

of Americans say they believe in God. But here's the catch. If there's a conflict between God and pleasure, guess who wins out on the schedule, or in the pocketbook?

A man came to me after the Sunday morning service shortly after I became a pastor and told me, "I won't be in church next week. I've got tickets to the U.K. basketball game. I knew you'd understand."!!

What could I say? What would you say? I'm not a legalist. I don't go to church because I have to. And I don't want you to come for that reason either. But when there's a conflict between God and pleasure, why is it that God so often takes second place?

I love the story of Eric Little, from *Chariots of Fire*, a man who loved God more than anything, more than competing in the Olympics, more than life itself. He died in a prison camp while serving as a missionary in the Far East because he settled this issue. I love the pleasure of God more than the pleasures of God's world.

Now we move from the *personal* and *interpersonal* traits of sin, to the *religious*.

19. Having a form of godliness. Notice what Paul did NOT say would happen in the last days. He did not say wicked men would get rid of religion (as the Communists tried unsuccessfully). Instead of getting rid of religion, Satan uses it. It's one of his most effective weapons.

Again, most people today are not irreligious, with 74% saying they believe in God. That's not coincidental. The problem is that the majority settles for "a form of godliness." But what's missing?

20. But denying its power. So there are churches on corner after corner in America. But what's missing in so many? This. They *deny its power*.

The power comes from the gospel, right? In Romans 1:16 Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God." There's what's missing. To say they deny the power of godliness is to say they deny the centrality of the gospel.

Again, there are multitudes of religious people in our country. But as Wiersbe puts it, they have form without force, religion without reality. And why is that? Because their form of godliness is about something other than the supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ and His death, burial, and resurrection.

It's easy for church to be about relationships, and self-fulfillment, and social programs. But when that happens, there goes the power of godliness.

So there they are, twenty traits of people in the last days.

Have you ever asked, "What's the real problem with the world today?"

Some say the problem is that we need a new economic program. Others say what we really need is a new educational system. Others say we need new leadership. What did Paul say the problem with society is?

He said it's a sin problem. But there's another way to describe it.

B. In terrible times society has a love problem. The real problem is that people have MISDIRECTED LOVE. Why did God create mankind? To love and serve Him. But what have men and women done with their love? We've misdirected it. We love the wrong things. Look again and you'll see this love problem.

1. *People love self (2).*
2. *People love money (2).*
3. *People don't really love other people (3a).*
4. *People don't love what is good (3b).*
5. *People love pleasure (4).*
6. *People fail to love God (4).*

Wiersbe sums it up, “In this universe there is God, and there are people and things. We should worship God, love people, and use things. But if we start worshiping ourselves, we will ignore God and start loving things and using people.”

That's exactly what's happening all around us. That's the reason times become terrible. People love the wrong things. They become consumed by the love of wrong things—self, money, pleasure. And they fail to love people, and what is good, and most importantly, the Lord Himself.

So what's the point of this ugly description anyway? Notice the end of verse 5, “Have nothing to do with them.” There's the crux. We've seen the proper reaction to terrible times—we mustn't be surprised, but must know the times. Then the proper recognition of terrible times—society has a sin problem and a love problem. Which leads to the proper response.

III. Here's the proper response to terrible times (5b).

“From such turn away,” says the AV. That's a command. Simply put...

A. We must be distinct from the world. Paul is firm. “Keep clear of people like that,” says the Phillips translation. This doesn't mean we should avoid all contact with sinners. Jesus certainly didn't, for He was a friend of sinners. But we are to be distinct from it.

We've just seen what society is like, twenty sinful characteristics. That's the world. But that must not be us.

Paul gives this plea in Romans 12:1-2, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Years ago when our daughter Katie was about four years old, I was with her in the house one day. I noticed her eyes were fixed on something. She seemed to be staring into space. I looked but couldn't see anything.

Finally, she said, “What's that?” I did a closer inspection and then I realized what she saw. She was standing in the path of the sunshine coming through the west window. What caught her eye were the dust particles hanging in the air, illuminated by the sun's rays.

I told her, “That's dust, Katie.”

She thought about it and then said, “I've never seen the dust in the air before.”

And I said, “Oh, the dust is always there but it takes the sun to make it visible.”

Now there's a teachable moment! That's the way it is, of course, with the dust spots of sin in our lives. They seem insignificant and go unnoticed. Until we're in the presence of the Son, and the Light of the world, Jesus Christ, exposes our lives for what they are.

That's why the world hates Christians. When we allow the light of Christ to shine through us, we actually expose the sin in people's lives. And while unpleasant, that's a good thing, for until a person sees his or her sin, he or she will never see their need for a Savior.

That's why we must be distinct from the world. Because...

B. We must make Christ known to the world.

During the second World War a pastor's wife and mother of five by the name of Ruth Caye Jones was reflecting on our text, 2 Timothy 3:1, and was moved deeply.

Those were dark days in the world, with 400,000 young US soldiers losing their lives, and 78 million people dying worldwide.

Mother Jones, as she came to be known, took a small notepad from her apron pocket, and jotted down the words and music to the following hymn, which George Beverly Shea later made famous.¹

*In times like these you need a Savior
In times like these you need an anchor;
Be very sure, be very sure
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!
This Rock is Jesus, Yes, He's the One;
This Rock is Jesus, the only One!
Be very sure, be very sure
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!*

*In times like these you need the Bible,
In times like these O be not idle;
Be very sure, be very sure
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!
This Rock is Jesus, Yes, He's the One;
This Rock is Jesus, the only One!
Be very sure, be very sure
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!*

*In times like these I have a Savior,
In times like these I have an anchor;
I'm very sure, I'm very sure
My anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!
This Rock is Jesus, Yes, He's the One;
This Rock is Jesus, the only One!
Be very sure, be very sure
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!*

That's the bottom line, my friends. In terrible times like these you and I and everyone else needs a Savior. Can you say with confidence, *my anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock?* And if you can, are you living like it?

¹ Story adapted from NameThatHymn.com