

# Session 5

## GOSPEL DIFFICULTY PART I

*2 Timothy 3:1-9*

### Memory Verse

*You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. <sup>2</sup> For people will love only themselves and their money.*

– 2 TIMOTHY 3:1-2A, CSB

## Gospel Difficulty - Part 1

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** The exclusivity of Christ and His gospel is implied in Paul's special emphasis on refuting false teaching. If truth isn't absolute, then why would it matter? Further, the critical and central role of the pastor continually comes to the fore in this letter, and in this passage especially.

During an excavation at Palatine Hill in Rome in 1857, an archeologist discovered a bit of graffiti carved into plaster. It showed two figures. On the left was a man in a posture of prayer and worship. On the right, rising above him, was a second man hung on a cross. Strangely, the man on the cross had the head of a donkey. Near the drawing was a string of Greek letters that mocked the praying man, "Alexamenos worships his god." Historians date this graffiti to around AD 200, making it the earliest surviving representation of Christ on the cross.

It is fitting that the earliest depiction of Jesus on the cross would be a carving that blasphemed Him and mocked His faithful follower Alexamenos. Though Alexamenos may have felt alone during that time of persecution, he was among many Christians across the Roman Empire who suffered persecution (many unto death) during the first 200 years of Christianity.

Timothy and the Christians in Ephesus faced their own unique attacks. Deceivers sought to mislead followers of Christ and take advantage of the situation. They resisted the truth and brought great distress and trouble to Timothy. You may be facing your own sorts of suffering and persecution for your faith. Let's consider how Paul's counsel to Timothy might apply to our contexts today.

**?** When have you or someone you know faced opposition because of belief in Jesus? How did you (or the person you know) respond?

---

---

**?** What are some reasons for opposition to the Christian faith and persecution in the world today?

---

---

## Session Summary

Paul wrote to Timothy, “But now this: Hard times will come in the last days!” But connects this passage to his immediate previous exhortation to Timothy, which was the challenge to be an approved workman by rightly dividing the Scriptures and faithfully shepherding the flock under his care (2:14-26).

The idea that Paul tried to convey may be summarized along the lines of: “Timothy, be faithful now because it’s only going to get worse!” Paul wasn’t interested in coddling Timothy. He knew that Timothy needed to know the truth and be encouraged to stay faithful to the mission. The work was already difficult, and Paul knew that it would likely get worse. The pagan world was not sympathetic to Christ and His gospel. Those who followed Christ would suffer. Timothy had to bear up under this suffering for the sake of the flock.

### 1. Detailed Description and Clear Instruction (2 Tim. 3:1-5)

The difficulties that Timothy faced, and that Paul warned he would have to face in the future, had to do with people. He didn’t warn him of sicknesses or financial struggles. Timothy’s main challenge came in the form of people who would counteract the message that he was meant to preserve and propagate.

**?** Why do you think the threat of false teachers was such a serious issue? What was the fundamental problem that they created?

---

---

What both Paul and Timothy knew was that nothing could be more damaging to a flock of believers than a deceiver who would lead them away from the pure gospel. This was also the issue facing the Galatians and why Paul wrote to them, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, a curse be on him!” (Gal. 1:8). If the gospel of Jesus Christ was lost, then all was lost.

We should be careful not to veer off into a point of view that makes God weak and unable to accomplish His purposes apart from the efforts of people. He does indeed accomplish the good work that He begins in believers (Phil. 1:6), but He does this good work in the context of the local church shepherded by faithful pastors who will protect the sheep from wolves and lead them to the green pastures of God’s pure Word.

**?** How did Paul describe the false teachers? Do you see any themes? Which characteristics jump out at you? How might this provide warning for false teachers we encounter today?

---

---

Paul’s lengthy list painted a disturbing picture of a person who was antithetical to the person who is in Christ and walking by the Spirit. Paul began and ended his list with two contrasting descriptions that give a tidy summary of this sort of person. He said they are “lovers of self” and not “lovers of God.” The essential quality of a false teacher, then and now, is that the throne of their heart is not occupied by God, but themselves.

The difficulty is that these people hold to a “form of godliness” but they deny its power. This means that they could easily deceive an onlooker because they appear to be of God, but in reality, their spirituality is bankrupt, void of power.

At the end of verse 5, we find the second command Paul gave Timothy in this passage. The first was located in the introductory verse (v. 1) where Paul said, “know.” He told Timothy to be aware of the danger that lay ahead. In the second command, Paul told him how to deal with it.

George Bernard Shaw once famously said: “I learned long ago never to wrestle with a pig. You get dirty, and besides, the pig likes it.” The idea is applicable here. Timothy’s fundamental job was to protect the flock, not to argue with false teachers. He certainly did that when necessary, but he wasn’t to go looking for a fight because he already had plenty to do without engaging in theological conflict. The problem with going toe to toe with false teachers is that, like wrestling with pigs, there will be some collateral damage. It may be necessary for the long-term good, but avoiding those sorts of people altogether would be the best route if possible. This is what Paul advised Timothy to do.

At this point, one might misunderstand that Timothy would be neglecting his responsibility and possibly even showing cowardice in avoiding interactions with false teachers. Yet, it takes great meekness, humility, and faith to turn away from false teachers and focus exclusively on shepherding the sheep. Again, it is necessary to engage them when they enter the fold and begin to inflict damage. It is not necessary, however, for a shepherd to venture into the forest to contend with wolves. It is for the good of the sheep when pastors are able to practice self-control, and turn their attention from a fight with a false teacher to the needs of their sheep.



**Application: How can you discern between false teachers and faithful teachers? What helps has God given to help us be aware and able to avoid falling into the trap of a deceiver?**

---

---

## 2. Tactical Advances (2 Tim. 3:6-8)

Next, Paul gave specific examples of how these false teachers can inflict damage. He spelled out some of their strategies to advance their agendas. Doubtless, Paul had seen this happen before. He didn't invent some scenario that he imagined could come to pass. Rather, in all likelihood he had seen these very things take place.

Persons burdened with sins are everywhere. They include outright opponents of the Gospel. Sadly, among them are individuals who have managed to damage congregations from the inside. In Timothy's day, these people—false teachers—worked by getting into households that would give them a hearing.

**?** What issue did Paul describe in detail? What are some patterns today that might lead people in the church to succumb to false teaching?

---

---

He said that some of these false teachers “worm their way into households and deceive gullible women overwhelmed by sins and led astray by a variety of passions.” It is not a small thing that Paul pointed out this particular strategy. He must have seen it multiple times and understood it to be one of the most successful tactics of false teachers. In other words, this appears to have been a point of weakness that the enemy exploited during the growth of the church in early Christianity.

This same problem may have been behind Paul's teaching to Titus, “In the same way, older women are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not slaves to excessive drinking. They are to teach what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands and to love their children, to be self-controlled, pure, workers at home, kind, and in submission to their husbands, so that God's word will not be slandered” (Titus 2:3-5).

**?** Application: How might others in the early church have helped defend the women spoken of in these verses from these dangers? How might this weakness be avoided today? What responsibility does the church have to one another in these matters?


---

---

Not everyone who is interested in religion is interested in the truth of Scripture. Some resist the truth and manipulate others for their own gain. We must know the truth, and must share the truth with those who will listen.


### 3. Folly Revealed (2 Tim. 3:9)

Paul compared the false teachers to Jannes and Jambres. These were the names given to the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses in Exodus 7. The names aren't biblical, but are found in early extrabiblical Jewish writings. These characters became important symbols of opposition to the truth of God, and they would have been well-known to Paul and Timothy. All of this must have felt a bit overwhelming to Timothy. He already faced difficulty, and then Paul told him that things were only going to get worse.

 What did Paul say at the end of this passage that would bring Timothy comfort?

---

---

 How might this bring us encouragement today when it feels as if false teaching threatens to overtake the church, despite efforts to continually teach the truth?

---


---

Assigning the names Jannes and Jambres to the false teachers would have brought two primary ideas to Timothy's mind. The first is the fact that those men had great power and influence. They served, after all, in the court of Pharaoh, the most powerful man on earth at the time. The second idea should have quickly followed. These great magicians were impotent before the power of God. Their appearance of power dissipated in the presence of real, divine power.

Paul contented the same would be true of the deceivers who caused Timothy trouble: "Their foolishness will be clear to all, as was the foolishness of Jannes and Jambres." Paul wanted Timothy to take necessary and wise action in response to the false

teachers, but he also wanted him to trust the Lord. Those deceivers would not thwart God's sovereign hand and plan any more than Jannes and Jambres were able to stop the exodus.

Timothy had to learn to labor vigorously, but he did so with his heart resting in the power of the Lord. The efforts of the false teachers would ultimately fail, and the work of the Lord would prevail. Timothy had the distinct privilege to be used of God to accomplish that plan in the lives of His redeemed people in the church of Ephesus. Paul wanted Timothy to labor with all his might, joyfully, to that end. Paul knew that Timothy (and all Christians) served a God "who works out everything in agreement with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11).

 **Application:** In what ways does God's sovereignty give us peace and rest? Where do you currently feel like you are striving in your own power but need God's power? How are you encouraged by the truth in this verse today?

---

---

## Conclusion

Following this passage, Paul pointed Timothy to the excellence of the Scriptures and encouraged him to highly esteem those writings. Timothy was going to need the firm foundation of God's Word if he was going to stay faithful to the task. God's will for Timothy as the pastor of Ephesus was that he would protect the gospel message from corruption and protect the sheep from wolves. Paul gave Timothy a clear and detailed description of those false prophets and their activities. Timothy had already experienced their work to some degree, but it was going to get worse according to Paul.

We need to take seriously the Scriptures' warning to be alert for any who express hostility against Christ and His Church. We should carefully check out what we hear being taught with what the Scriptures say and teach. We ought to emulate Christians who show they consistently live by the Scriptures' guidance. We can be confident in the Scriptures as our guide, leading us to salvation and equipping us to live for the Lord.



**?** What are some ways you might have unconsciously let false teaching have influence over your life? How are you encouraged to return to truth from today's study?

---

---

**?** What can we as a group and as a church do to point one other to the truth and to defend against false teaching in our midst?

---

---

**?** How does a commitment to speaking the truth with one another and sharing the gospel with others help in this effort?

---

---

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Christ is the Good Shepherd who redeemed Timothy and in whom Timothy must find his strength to carry out the mission (John 15:5). The truth of Christ is the heart of the message, which Timothy was to defend.

**MISSIONAL APPLICATION:** The long-term labor of establishing a congregation in the truth, protecting them from false teaching, raising up leaders, and installing pastors to oversee the congregation is a crucial aspect of getting the gospel to the world and a critical piece of the puzzle of the advancement of the Kingdom.



# FOR NEXT WEEK

## Gospel Difficulty - Part 2

### Main Passages

- 2 Timothy 3:10-17

### Session Outline

1. Praise (2 Timothy 3:10-11)
2. Assurance (2 Timothy 3:12-13)
3. Reminder (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

### Memorize

*You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. <sup>2</sup> For people will love only themselves and their money.*

- 2 Timothy 3:1-2a, CSB

### Daily Readings

- Monday - 2 Timothy 3:1-9
- Tuesday - John 14:6
- Wednesday - 1 Timothy 4:1
- Thursday - Jude 1:3-4
- Friday - 2 Peter 2:1-3
- Saturday - 1 Thessalonians 5:21