

Ever Increasing Apostasy (2 Timothy 3:1-9)

Contrary to some who believe that the world is getting better and better through political and technological progress, the Bible clearly indicates that difficult days lie ahead. Human sinfulness, often expressed through social structures, is leading humankind into increasingly tragic inhumanity—wars, violence, human trafficking, religious persecution, and spiritual apostasy. Jesus warned about such disastrous days leading up to His return (Matthew 24:6-8). The church's role has never been to usher in God's Kingdom, but to reach lost people with the gospel who will eventually become a part of Jesus' Messianic Kingdom. Christ's reign on earth will be preceded by intensifying spiritual rebellion. Paul describes this same scenario in 1 Timothy 4:1, stating, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons." In 2 Timothy 3:1 he says, "But mark this: there will be terrible times in the last days." The future will be characterized by ever increasing apostasy. But this falling away from God will culminate in Jesus' glorious return and reign. Christians should face spiritual erosion with the utmost confidence in Jesus' ultimate reign. With this in mind, 2 Timothy 3:1-9 reminds us that we shouldn't be surprised about the future.

Don't be surprised by increasing apostasy (3:1-5).

First of all, Christians shouldn't be surprised about the increase of apostasy in the world. Commitment to the Lord will decline and personal character will deteriorate over time. For this reason, believers must renew their resolve to stand firm in the faith.

As the end times approach, expect increasing societal decay (3:1).

There was to be no doubt in Timothy's mind. Paul told him to "mark this," literally "know this," the fact about increasing societal decline. The future would be characterized by "terrible" or "violent" (compare the use of this word in Matthew 8:28) times. Such difficult times will become increasingly intense "in the last days." Obviously Paul included his own time as the "last days" since he warned Timothy about their contemporary situation. In fact, the phrase "last days" seems to encompass the entire age between Jesus' first and second advents (compare Acts 2:16-17; Hebrews 1:2; James 5:3; 2 Peter 3:3; Jude 17-19). Based on Jesus' teachings in Matthew 24:29-30, the final phase of these last days will bring about unprecedented tribulation followed by the second coming of Christ. While we long for societal stability and global peace, we know from God's revealed Word that difficult days lie ahead. We should expect increasing societal decay as we faithfully spread the good news of God's saving grace.

As the end times approach, expect increasing character erosion (3:2-5a).

As we approach the time of the end we should anticipate the erosion of character, the virtues that reflect God's holy nature and that form the glue of any healthy civilization. Paul lists nineteen character traits of a decaying world, using couplets to emphasize the extreme nature of these vices. In Romans 1:29-32 he presents a similar list to describe depraved humanity. What's disturbing is that in 2 Timothy 3:2-5a Paul attributes these vices to those who claim to have some identity with the Christian community. However, such people are actually apostates, those who have rejected or abandoned any real association with Jesus Christ.

The ever increasing erosion of character will produce people who are "self-lovers" and "money-lovers." They are "boastful" in their words and "arrogant" in their attitudes (a word that literally means to appear higher than others). These apostates are "abusive" (literally blasphemous) and disobedient to parents (having no respect for authority in the home and, consequently, in society). They are "ungrateful" and "unholy" (irreligious). They are "unaffectionate" (without the natural love that might be evident within a family) and "unforgiving" (unable to maintain a treaty, irreconcilable). These apostates are "slandorous" (a term from which we get our word "devil") and "without self control." "Untamed" (like wild animals) and "un-lovers of good," "betrayers" (a term used of Judas in Luke 6:16) and "rash" (reckless, literally "falling forward"), "conceited" (puffed up like smoke) and "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God," these apostates stand in stark contrast to the character of God. Finally, Paul states that such people "have a form of piety"—an outward appearance of religious virtue—but actually deny any true spiritual power. Their lives and character are an empty charade. As people turn away from God they turn toward such vices as these that Paul lists in his warning to Timothy.

As the end times approach, expect an ongoing need to repudiate spiritual apostasy (3:5b).

From such apostates Paul warns Timothy, "Turn away!" We must turn away from those who turn away from the Lord. Of course, it's possible to win such people back to faith in Jesus Christ, but we should never let their flawed character or deceptive practices infiltrate our hearts, let alone the church. Therefore, we shouldn't let increasing apostasy catch us off guard.

**Don't become a victim
of insidious apostasy (3:6-7).**

Apostasy is both increasing and insidious. It has a way of flying under the radar and infiltrating the hearts of those who are inattentive or eager for an excuse to pursue their own sinful passions. Apostates look for unsuspecting victims to catch in their web of deceit. We need to guard our hearts and warn others about the dangers of drifting from the faith.

Apostates target morally weak people in order to lead them into deeper sin (3:6a).

False teachers, like wolves, take advantage of the weak members of the flock. They “creep into houses,” insinuating themselves into the lives of their unsuspecting victims by their subtle means. In so doing, they are able to “take captive” those who avail themselves of the apostate teachers’ ploys. Specifically, Paul identifies “weak-willed women” (the term is a diminutive and derogatory term, literally “little women”) as the target of the apostate teachers in the early church. These women were weak morally and spiritually, perfect victims of deception. Of course, both women and men could fall into the category of morally weak and susceptible people.

Morally weak people are characterized by sinful practices, sinful passions, and superficial spiritual pursuits (3:6b-7).

Paul described the morally weak women of his day as “loaded down with sins.” Sinful practices were their normal experience, indicating that they had not fully embraced the life changing message of the gospel. They were “led by various lusts,” driven by their sensuous passions and desires. In addition, these weak women were “always learning.” They pursued any new idea that came along, pretending by their intellectual openness to be sophisticated savants. However, they were “never able to come into the knowledge of the truth.” Their superficial spiritual pursuits led them deeper into error. The truth, the gospel of Jesus Christ, eluded them. They were all too happy to engage new ideas that would validate their sinful practices. The truth, however, confronts sin at every turn and demands transformation. Apostasy takes captive morally weak victims. God’s people must guard against such insidious apostasy.

**Don’t doubt the ultimate
defeat of insane apostasy (3:8-9).**

Apostasy is increasing, insidious, and inane. It makes no sense in contrast to the gospel. Paul describes apostates as having corrupt minds and acting out of folly. But he assures Timothy that such apostates will not prevail. Their error will become evident.

Because of their corrupt minds, apostates stand in opposition to the truth (3:8).

Reaching back into Jewish history, Paul refers to the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses at the time of the Exodus. Specifically, Paul mentions by name two magicians, Jannes and Jambres. These names are not recorded in the Old Testament, although they appear in some later traditional Jewish writings. Either Paul, through divine inspiration, is verifying the accuracy of these traditions or he is simply citing these commonly held traditions to emphasize

his point. Certainly a number of Egyptian magicians withstood Moses, imitating the miracles of God (Exodus 7:11-12, 22; 8:7). Eventually, however, the inadequacy of these magicians' tricks became evident (Exodus 9:11). In the same way apostates in the church stood in opposition to the truth, the gospel of Jesus Christ. These apostates had corrupt, or depraved, minds. They failed the test when it came to the true faith. Sinful, selfish thinking will always resist the truth of Jesus' redemptive work. But truth will win out over error.

Because of the power of the truth, the foolishness of apostasy will become evident to others (3:9).

Paul assures Timothy and all believers that apostates in the church "will not advance any further." There is a divinely appointed limit to their influence. Eventually their "folly" will become clear to all. Just as the foolish opposition to Moses on the part of the Egyptian magicians became evident by God's overwhelming power, so the foolish opposition to the truth on the part of apostates will become clear to others. Apostasy, while dangerous, insidious, and foolish, will be defeated. The truth of Jesus Christ will prevail. Christians need not fear the advance of apostasy. We can face spiritual erosion with the utmost confidence in Jesus' ultimate reign.