

WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU CAN BE

by Ray C. Stedman

Last week we looked at the passage in Second Timothy 3 which describes, in very graphic terms, the times of distress which will come repeatedly during this period of "the last days," that is, the period between our Lord's first coming until he returns again.

Without a doubt we are going through one of those times of stress today. The evidence is visible on every side:

- There is the rocketing rate of teenage suicide. I was shocked the other day to read that in the past year suicide among teenagers has increased some 200% over what it was the previous year. This speaks of widespread despair among young people as they look to a future that seems bleaker and blacker than ever before.
- Then there is the marriage burn-out syndrome we are so familiar with.
- Also, nuclear war jitters are now stirring up people to protest and demonstrate against the nuclear arms race.
- Then there are the familiar figures of drug and alcohol addiction and the resulting violent outbursts that startle us from time to time.

Some of this stress comes very close to home. Some of you who have been laid off work are feeling stress. Others are experiencing family breakups, or facing physical crises. All these are part of the times of stress that people have to endure.

When such circumstances arise, the question, "How can a Christian cope?" always comes up. What do we do in response to such times of pressure? As he was writing to Timothy, the Apostle Paul understood that this would be Timothy's question too. Paul had left him in the pagan environment of Ephesus to lead the leaders of the church there. Timothy undoubtedly was questioning in his own heart what he could do to withstand the pressure of the times. How could he resist being swept along into hard-hearted cynicism, blatant immorality, or blasphemy, bitterness and resentment in his heart against the workings of God? How do we stand in such times?

The apostle answers by giving Timothy two simple things to do. Today we will take the first of these. (This section runs from 2 Timothy 3:10 through the end of the chapter.) In the first part, Paul says to Timothy, "Remember my model. Do what I did. Do what you saw me do when you traveled with me these past 15 or 16 years. Remember my example." The second thing Paul says to Timothy is, "Trust the Scriptures to guide you. This Book is given to help us through times of persecution, stress and difficulty. It is the book of reality."

What a tremendous impact a good model can make! Last Thursday, Pat Thebus and I joined Howard Bennett, and together we flew in Howard's plane up to central Montana, where I was to speak at the commencement address of the Big Sky Bible College. (The college was not even built when I lived in that part of the country, but I have since had a part in its ministry.) It was a great experience for me, because Lewistown, where the school is located, is only 40 miles from the tiny Montana town where I graduated from high school, I am ashamed to say it, almost 50 years ago.

We went up a day early so that I could see what had happened in the 44 years since I had been in that town. It was a sentimental journey. It was a moving experience for me to meet some of my old classmates, to see how much of the town was still standing, and how much it had been built up since.

One of the things that made a deep impression on me was to drive past the ranch, just a mile or so out of town,

where a rancher and his wife, who bore no relationship to me, nevertheless virtually adopted me as a son when I was in high school. I had spent many happy hours there doing the usual work of a ranch. But I was especially drawn to the rancher, who was like a father to me. Memories of all the things he had taught me and modeled for me -- patience, fortitude, manliness and humor -- came flooding back into my mind as I drove past the place where we had spent so many happy times together.

I am sure that is what the Apostle Paul is seeking to do here with Timothy. He reminds Timothy that he had set before him an example, so he says to him, "Do what I did." Here are Paul's words. Second Timothy 3:10:

Now you have observed by teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions, my sufferings, what befell me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra, what persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. {2 Tim 3:10-11 RSV}

When Paul says, "You observed this," he uses a very strong word in the Greek, which means, "You came right along with me; you accompanied me through all of this; you saw all these things, now don't forget them."

When we ask ourselves, "What did Paul do when his world threatened to come apart, how did he react in that first generation of Christians, when the whole Roman world was about to explode in warfare, when pagan pressure and superstition abounded on every side and the civilized world seemed to be given over to widespread sexual immorality?" We must notice the first thing Paul says: "Timothy, you observed my teaching." What did Paul do when the world was in trouble? He taught the truth; he reminded himself and his hearers of what is real about life; he exposed the illusions and the delusions of his day to the revelation of Scripture so that people could get their heads on straight and think rightly, truly and realistically about life. That encourages me a great deal, because I believe that every Christian ought to be able to teach the truth about life from the Word of God. We desperately need this today.

A few weeks ago I watched a group of young pastors on the East Coast as they listened to a man of some prominence reveal to them and review for them the terrible nuclear threat that hangs over the world today. He described in very graphic terms what a nuclear holocaust would be like, the awful threat of the virtual elimination of life from the face of the earth if the superpowers should ever resort to nuclear war. He was doing this to try to stir them to protest and to get involved in demonstrations against the nuclear arms race.

I watched these young pastors become sober and fearful as they listened. It struck me that there was something missing, that though this threat is very real -- there is no question that a nuclear holocaust would result in the virtual destruction of the human race -- nevertheless, that is not what the Scriptures say about life. There was a missing element.

During the course of the discussion that followed I was able to suggest that we needed to turn to the Word of God and learn again of his sovereignty over human events; that God, not man, is in charge of this world; that man proposes but God disposes; that there are limits to man's ability to carry out his evil purposes, and we needed to see again that God puts in the hands of Christians spiritual weapons by which to influence the times in which we live. As we talked about these things, I could sense a spirit of renewed hope and of challenge come into the hearts of these young pastors.

I believe that is what the Scriptures are for: they are to guide us in times of despair, of pressure, and of stress. The very first thing the Apostle Paul would do would be to give himself to proclaiming the mighty revelation of God, to help men see again that God is in charge of life.

Then, not only was Paul's teaching involved, but, as he puts it, so was his conduct. "You observed my conduct," he says. That means that when he was confronted with danger, persecution, and stress, he behaved himself; he practiced what he preached. By returning to the word of faith, Paul controlled his temper, subdued his lusts, mastered his passions, conquered his fears, and forgave his enemies. He did what God told him to do: He worked with his hands, he supported himself, he prayed for his friends, he kept himself growing and walking in the Spirit because he knew that was the greatest thing he could do to counteract the fear, the

depression and danger of the times in which he lived.

These first two words are very important. They have direct relevance to us. How should we react to such times? Paul's answer is, let us teach; let us open men's eyes and hearts to what God is doing in this world. There is a conspiracy of silence against that today. That is why people are scared to death. They live in downright, abject fear because of what the future holds for them. How wonderful for Christians to be able to unfold the realities of life to people and to manifest those realities in their own conduct! That is the greatest thing we can do to steady the world in this time of danger.

Not only did Paul model his actions for Timothy, but he also modeled his attitudes. He says, "Remember my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness." Those are great qualities which the apostle had set as an example before this young man.

The most important of them is the first one, Paul's aim in life. Paul did not do anything that did not relate to what was, for him, the most important thing in life. He himself tells us in many places, notably in Second Corinthians, what that was:

Whether at home or away [i.e., in the body or out of the body], we make it our aim to please him." (2 Cor 5:9 {RSV})

Everything Paul did in life was done with the understanding that it would either please the Lord Jesus or it would result in grief of heart to him. That was Paul's guiding light.

I find there are many Christians today who think that when you become a Christian you get unusual power to enable you to do special things, miracles, etc. But Christianity is not a way of doing special things, it is a special way of doing everything. Paul's special aim in everything he did was to please the Lord Jesus. What a simple thing that is, and yet how profoundly it would affect us if we would ask ourselves a dozen times a day, "Is what I am saying, what I am doing, what I am thinking, pleasing to my Lord? Does it reflect his beauty, his character, his loveliness?"

With this the apostle links his faith, because that is what made his aim possible. Faith is the confidence that there exist certain invisible realities which are extremely important to us, and then acting in the light of those realities. Faith is believing that God is at work in running human affairs, and that he will give us power to love and to speak with gentleness and graciousness when we are being mistreated or abused. Faith is the consciousness of invisible realities. Paul tells Timothy that that is the key to his behavior.

Then there was the apostle's patience. This was always with regard to people. Sometimes it is hard to be patient with people.

I have found that not everybody is as lovely, gracious, sweet and easy to get along with as I am, so there are times when I am tempted to be impatient with those stupid people who cannot respond like I do! They, of course, are thinking the same thing about me.

That is why the Word of God says that one of the characteristics of a true Christian life is that we learn to develop patience. We sometimes say, "Don't bug me. Don't push me. Let me have time to work this out. Give me some breathing room. Get off my back." Others feel that way too. If you want others to be patient, then surely it is only right that they should expect you to be patient with them. That is what the Scriptures exhort us to do. Paul had demonstrated this to Timothy, and he reminds him of it.

With that Paul links love. This is the word, above all others, that ought to describe the Christian approach. Love means an acceptance of everyone as being valuable; you do not regard anyone with contempt or disdain, you do not put anyone down. You understand that, though people may be struggling, though they may be difficult, nevertheless, they are valuable. God loves them; God has made them in his own image. People have great possibilities if they are touched in the right way. This is what Christian love manifests.

Finally, there is the quality of steadfastness. That means endurance, not quitting when the pressures get rough,

hanging in there, not merely in a grin-and-bear-it attitude, but rather with a confidence that God is working things out.

Someone told the story of the man in a testimony meeting who said, "My favorite Scripture is the verse that says, 'And it came to pass,' because when something happens to me I remind myself that it didn't come to stay, it came to pass." If you wait, it will pass.

But Paul says to wait in cheerfulness, triumph, and quietness of heart.

Not only did Paul model his actions and his attitudes, but he specifically reviews for Timothy certain persecutions and sufferings that he underwent. He says, "You have observed my persecutions, my sufferings, what befell me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra, what persecutions I endured."

I believe that you never really get to know anybody until you know what he has been through. Recently I read the book by Elton Trueblood, *Abraham Lincoln, Theologian of American Anguish*. The book traces the years of Lincoln's presidency, a time when he was growing by leaps and bounds in Christian stature as a mature believer in Christ. The key to his growth was the personal anguish he suffered. Not only was there the terrible pressure of the war between the States -- he took very personally and felt very keenly the awful bloodbath the nation was passing through as thousands of boys from both North and South were dying on the fields of battle -- but his favorite son, his beloved 12-year-old Willie, died while he was President. There were also the daily vituperative attacks of the press upon him. He was lampooned, ridiculed, mocked and insulted in most of the papers. There was widespread opposition against him.

Rather than crushing him, rather than making him react with anger, bitterness, and vituperation in return, however, all of this humbled Lincoln. As he himself put it, "I was often driven to my knees with the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go." If you go to Washington, visit the Lincoln Memorial and read there the words of the Second Inaugural Address, to my mind one of the greatest words any statesman ever uttered. There you will see that through all the agony, the pressure and the anguish that he underwent, Lincoln came to understand and to see more clearly, perhaps, than many of his successors the sovereignty of God in national affairs; how the hand of God was governing the conduct of the war and bringing about judgment on a people that would result in righteousness, justice, and truth in the land again.

Here Paul is reminding Timothy, "You were with me during many of those times of persecution. Remember how at Antioch I had to leave town lest my life be taken, how at Iconium I was driven out by a lynch mob, and how at Lystra I was stoned and left for dead outside the city walls." Yet Paul adds these words, "But out of them all the Lord delivered me." Timothy was with Paul in many other times of trouble, but these early experiences evidently burned themselves into his mind.

There is nothing like the shock value of the first discovery of truth. The apostle is trying to remind Timothy here of the surprise he must have felt when he realized that an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, Lord of heaven and earth, could and would suffer like Paul did. This gives an adequate answer to the idea abroad today that, when you become a Christian, God protects you from all kinds of danger, that you never get into any peril but God saves you from it, that God goes to work for you to make you prosperous. That is not what Paul experienced. If that is the sign of successful Christianity, then Paul was the greatest failure of all Christians because he suffered these many experiences. He reminds Timothy that is what God had designed.

But the fourth factor that Paul reveals here, and which he modeled for Timothy, is undoubtedly the most important of all. It is found in these words:

... yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived. {2 Tim 3:11b-13}

The bottom line of how to stand in times of pressure is right here. Paul knew the secret of the Divine Presence: the Lord was with him, working in all the events of his life. In everything Paul did, Jesus Christ walked with him and was beside him to strengthen and help him.

You cannot read Paul's letters without seeing that every one of them focuses upon the amazing truth that in all the difficult times and all the blessed times of his life, his Lord stood with him. We need to rediscover this secret today. Paul saw Jesus as Lord in charge of all events,

- "the One who opens and no man shuts, the One who shuts and no man opens" {cf, Rev 3:7b};
- The One who lays a restraining hand upon the violent people of earth so that they can go only so far and no further;
- The One who restrains mobs and opens a door of escape in times of distress;
- The One who prepares men and women to be ready to respond when the Word is preached.

Paul saw Jesus as his own personal Savior

- Who forgave him his sins,
- Who picked him up when he was discouraged,
- Who stood by him in times of pressure.

He saw Jesus as his Companion, as his dearest Friend who never left him.

That is the secret of standing today. Christianity was never intended to be merely a creed that you believe, or certain doctrines that you subscribe to. Christianity is a Person whom you know, whom you live with, rely upon and walk with day-by-day.

But even more: Paul not only understood the secret of the Divine Presence, but also that his very trials were part of a designed course. In fact, he says, "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived."

That very remarkable statement is saying that true Christianity is always a counter-culture movement; it is always against the grain.

You will not always be popular when you stand and speak as a Christian. Sometimes you will; sometimes your words will be welcomed, and reckoned as cold water on a hot day. On other occasions, what you say will be sneered at, ridiculed, and laughed at; you will be put down and rejected. All that is part of being a Christian. That is what it means to "stand" in these days.

There is a phony "folk Christianity" around today that will enable you to apparently escape all these persecutions. In every church there are people who are trying to put on a Christian front. Paul spoke about them in the passage we looked at last week, describing them as, "having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof," (2 Tim 3:5 {KJV}). They act like Christians, they read the Book, and sing the hymns, but they have no reality of Christ in their lives. That kind of Christianity does escape a lot of persecution because it never stands for anything. But, in the end, it perishes along with the world; it is destroyed in the judgments of God. I know that many people who come to church reflect the attitude that says,

I would like to buy \$3.00 worth of God, please. Not enough to explode my soul, or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of Him to make me love a Black man, or to pick beets with a migrant. I want ecstasy, not transformation. I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy just \$3.00 worth of God, no more.

That kind of Christianity is worthless. It does nothing to stem the tide of corruption and disaster toward which the human race is headed. If we want to be men and women of God, we are to follow the models that are held before us.

As this age draws to a close, evil will increase, the apostle says. Men and women who believe their own lies will speak with intense conviction so that many will follow in their evil ways, victims of the great deceiver, the god of this world, the devil. But if you want to stand against the stream, if you want to make your life count in these days, then do what Paul did:

- Teach the truth; spread it around. Let people know what is right and real about life from the Book which you hold in your hand.
- Live righteously: Practice what you preach.
- Expect trouble, because you will get it. There will be times when what you say will be very unpopular, but that does not stop you from saying it and living it.
- Above all else, walk with the Lord. Love the Lord Jesus. Live in his presence. Draw closer each day to that Divine Lord who walks invisibly in our midst, who is in charge of all the events of earth, controlling them and working them out to his one great purpose which he shall bring to pass.

God knows that things are going to get worse and worse -- he intended them to -- but he has planted within that decaying, corrupting, morally imperfect civilization men and women like you and me who are given the privilege of standing for truth and righteousness in a day of declension.

May God grant that we will be such people.

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that you will forgive us for the many times we have allowed the world to creep into our thinking and guide our conduct, when we have faded into the background and been lost in the crowd on its way to darkness, delusion and hell. Grant to us Lord the courage and the grace to stand, impelled by this Divine Presence within, that we might be workmen who need not be ashamed, rightly handling the Word of truth. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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