

Explore: Be Guided by God's Word

April 13, 2013

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for April 28 focuses on 2 Timothy 3:1-17.*

This passage opens with reference to what will happen “in the last days” (v. 1). To contemporary readers, there is a temptation to see this as a reference to the end of the world, complete with fire and judgment. However, within the universe of the New Testament, any time after Christ’s incarnation, death and resurrection is part of the “last days,” even if the last days endure for a long time.

Even though the letter may not be communicating signs of an imminent return of Christ, it does highlight the difficulties to be experienced by Christ’s followers, with the emphasis on love and its direction. In this section, whether one has love is not the question (all human beings are lovers of some sort). Instead, the direction of that love is crucial.

What you love

Thus, we find people who are “lovers of themselves, lovers of money... not lovers of the good” and “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (vv. 2-4). What you love and how you love are very important. Second Timothy seems to be responding to a specific set of circumstances regarding false teaching.

These particular false teachers are dangerous because they have “a form of godliness but (deny) its power” (v. 5) and “worm their way into homes” and “gain control over gullible women” (v. 6). We should note any prohibitions

here against a group of women should not be expanded to refer to all women. In other words, phrases like “gullible women” should be limited to a few females in Ephesus.

False teachers

Despite their size, this group has fallen prey to false teachers who lack faith and love (1:13) and do not have the truth (2:25). Second Timothy compares these erroneous leaders to Jannes and Jambres (v. 8), Pharaoh’s magicians in the Exodus story. (Their names are provided by Jewish tradition.) They opposed Moses by attempting to replicate his miracles, and while they were successful initially—turning the Nile into blood—they failed over the long term, revealing “their folly” to everyone (v. 9).

The next section of this week’s passage is a defense of Paul’s life and ministry, including its results—suffering. This account is not simply an effort by the apostle to defend his honor, though it does partly serve that purpose. More importantly, though, it is an embodied declaration that Timothy should imitate Paul’s life and expect the same results: “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (v. 12).

This is part of a larger encouragement to continue to grow in the faith. Timothy is described as having known Scripture “from infancy” (v. 15). Presumably, this is a subtle reference to Timothy’s family background, his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, who passed on the Jewish faith that eventually grew and flourished in the form of his Christian commitment and ministry.

An ongoing journey

Nonetheless, despite a deep scriptural heritage, Timothy has not yet “arrived”; more improvement and growth can be accomplished, which is a

helpful reminder to all of us that the Christian life is an ongoing journey.

The remainder of the passage discusses the nature of Scripture, using the phrase “God-breathed” (v. 16). This verse is the basis for Christians’ claim the Bible is inspired (or literally, “breathed by God”). Originally, the mention of Scripture likely referred to the Old Testament only, but over time, both parts of the Christian canon—Old and New Testaments—were understood to be “God-breathed.”

Although it is stated in a simple and straight-forward manner, inspiration is a tricky concept to understand, because the process of inspiration is more or less a mystery to us. Some readers understand Scripture’s inspiration to mean every word was chosen specifically by God, which is difficult to hold since different texts reflect each author’s background, experiences and stylistic preferences. Other readers reduce inspiration to something that creates an “ah ha” moment or changes one’s outlook on life—something that is “inspiring.”

Authority of scripture

For our purposes, we should emphasize inspiration indicates the authority of Scripture. Its ultimate source, even if mediated by human hands, experiences and institutions, is God. So, Scripture is the primary authority for Christian faith and practice. Along these lines, we find the Bible is “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (v. 16). In other words, reading Scripture is not simply about reading; it is about living out a life of faithfulness.

Moreover, the tasks listed in verse 17 should not be viewed as individual jobs; instead, they are properly “at home” and performed in the church. What this means is that, while the Bible should be read for personal devotions and faith development, it is first and foremost the church’s book, recording the interactions between God and God’s people in order that

God's people can live in righteous faithfulness to God in a variety of contexts.

Therefore, when 2 Timothy encourages the reader to continue to grow in faith through the Scriptures, the heart of this encouragement is to remain steadfast to the faith by living in the church and reading the Scriptures together with the church.