

# When the Wolves Come (2 Timothy 2:14-19)

**Big Idea:** Wolves are coming. So remind yourself of truth because it matters, and eliminate false teaching because it kills.

We didn't expect it. We didn't ask for it. We don't want it. But we got it. This year, our lives have been upended by a virus that you can't even see. I don't know when things will return to normal, and I'm not sure I can even remember what normal is anymore. But we don't always get to choose the problems that we face.

Timothy also didn't expect it. He didn't ask for it. But he got it. He was leader in the church in Ephesus, and he had a problem, a big problem. It's the same problem that every church has faced ever since. It's a problem that we are going to face. Paul warns in Acts 20:29, "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock."

What is the problem? People who call themselves Christians, but who have departed from the truth.

Think about this. We talk about being a church that welcomes everyone regardless of where they are in their spiritual journey. And most of us have an allergy against being argumentative. We're allergic against anything that looks like combative Christianity. And so when people within the church begin to wander from the truth, we find it very hard. What do we do?

And so, Liberty Grace, I can't think of a more important message for us right now than this.

For the past few weeks we've been studying a letter that Paul wrote to his protégé Timothy, leader of a church in Ephesus. And here's one of the sad realities. Paul had been abandoned by people in the church who had turned their back on him and on the truth.

So what do you do when this happens? What do you do when people within the church wander from the truth? That's the big question we're going to face today as we look at this passage.

Wolves are coming. How should we respond? By taking two actions.

## **Remind Yourself of Truth Because It Matters**

Paul says a few things in this passage that we need to hear. The first is this: truth matters, and pastors have a special role in upholding that truth.

Read verses 14 to 15 with me:

*Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.*

I don't know if you underline your Bible or not, but if you do, underline the first word of verse 14: *remind*. The word in the Greek means to keep reminding. This is Timothy's ongoing task, week in and week out. Do it this week, and do it again next week. Keep reminding people of the truth. Keep going. Never stop.

Somebody's even written a book called [Preaching as Reminding](#). He writes:

*Preaching doesn't always have to explain new truths. Neither does it always have to persuade people believe those truths. Nor does it always have to exhort people to obey the truths. Sometimes it can simply remind folks of what they already understand, believe, and are attempting to obey.*

We don't need new truths; we need to be reminded of old ones.

As part of this command, Paul tells Timothy what else to do. He's supposed to charge his people not to quarrel about words. What does Paul mean here? Paul is saying that truth matters, and we need to be reminded of the truth, but that doesn't mean we should get into word fights. In the movie *1917*, Lance Corporal Schofield is tasked with crossing through enemy-infested territory to deliver crucial news of a secret ambush to the British front lines. He's supposed to tell the commanding officer to stand down and not enter the battle because it's an ambush. He's given a warning, though. "Make sure there are witnesses," he's told. "Some men just like the fight."

"Some men just like the fight." If you ever come across someone like that in your church, Paul tells Timothy, warn them. Beware if itchy fingers and hair-trigger guns. Know when it's time to contend for the truth, but also know when it's time to stand down.

How is Timothy supposed to manage this balance of reminding and keeping the focus on the truth without letting people fight about everything? He's got to handle the Word well himself. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth," Paul says in verse 15. The image is of a worker who cuts straight. A good pastor knows how to cut the Word of God straight. A good pastor knows how to interpret and apply the Bible faithfully. A good basketball player knows how to shoot from the three-point line; a good accountant knows how to work a spreadsheet; a good carpenter knows

how to use a skilsaw; a good pastor knows how to handle God's Word. It is essential that the pastor knows the truth and is able to handle God's word well.

Put this together and you get what Paul is saying: truth matters. One of the most important things to do as a church is to keep being reminded of what is true, to find pastors who know how to use the Word well and regularly remind the congregation of the truth, while avoiding people who just like to fight. If you want a healthy church, we need to do all of this all the time. It's really important.

Wolves are coming. How should we respond? By reminding yourself of truth because it matters. But that's not all.

## **Eliminate False Teaching Because It Kills**

So what do you do about false teaching? Paul is clear in verses 16 to 19 about its danger and what we should do about it.

### **False Teaching Kills**

"But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene" (2:16-17). False teaching is not innocuous. It leads people into ungodliness. Causation, not correlation. False teaching causes ungodliness.

It spreads like gangrene. Gangrene is the localized death of living cells due to infection or loss of blood supply. If it's not treated, it will continue to eat away at the body until the patient dies. That's what false teaching does. It eats away at the life of

the church until it eventually kills it. You don't mess around with false teaching. You avoid it, because otherwise it will kill you.

"Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some" (2:17-18).

This isn't the first time that Paul mentions the name of Hymenaeus. In his first letter, Paul spoke of two men, including Hymenaeus, who'd "made shipwreck of their faith." He said he had handed them "over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme" (1 Timothy 1:19-20).

Here we get some more information about their false teaching. The Bible teaches that there will be a final resurrection. Christ will return; the bodies of the dead will be raised and reunited with their souls; the bodies of those who are alive will be changed, so that all believers have glorified bodies just like Jesus. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, "Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed." This is a first-order issue. If you lose our future resurrection, you lose Christianity.

But these two said the resurrection had already happened. We don't know exactly what they were getting at: maybe that the resurrection is just a mystical experience that happens inside, and that the body's not important as long as our soul lives on.

Spurgeon said, "Take away the resurrection, and what remains of the gospel? The resurrection of Christ, and the consequent resurrection of his people, is the keystone of the arch of the Christian system; and if that be removed as a myth the whole building falls."

Side note: From funerals I attend, I find a lot of us today are a little shaky on the truth of our future bodily resurrection. Given the emphasis that Paul puts on this truth, and how important it is to Christian hope, maybe it's time we brushed up on this truth that's so central to Christianity.

Take this seriously. First-order theological truths are crucial. If we lose them we lose Christianity. False teaching kills.

## **So Eliminate It**

So what do we do about false teaching? We eliminate it. Paul says to avoid it in verse 16. He says to depart from it in verse 19. "But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.'"

Paul thinks back to a sad story in Israel's history found in Numbers 16. A man named Korah led a rebellion with about 250 people against Moses' leadership. Moses responded by telling them to appear before God the next day. When the time came, God spoke to Moses: "Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment" (Numbers 16:21). Moses warned the congregation to separate from the rebels. We read:

*And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly.*

*And all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us up!" (Numbers 16:31-34)*

The point of the story, according to Paul: depart from false teachers, because if you don't you're putting your own life in danger. It's that serious. False teaching requires that we take decisive action and get away as fast as we can.

In his book [What Church Can Be](#), Matthew Kruse says:

*What does a healthy church do with wolves?*

*We do not coddle them. We do not dialogue with them. We do not consider their perspective. We do not invite them to join a panel. We do not defer their ideas to a study committee. We do not suggest or recommend or propose or intimate. We silence the wolves.*

We didn't ask for the coronavirus. But we got it. And we didn't ask for false teaching. But we're going to get that too. Our church will face a lot of dangers, and some of them will come from within in the form of false teachers.

**Wolves are coming. So remind yourself of truth because it matters, and eliminate false teaching because it kills.**

Again, to quote Matthew Kruse:

*If a church is going to be safe and healthy for Jesus's people, we must be aware that wolves will find their way inside. And when they do, we can't hesitate about what to do.*

*Good shepherds silence wolves.*

So how about it, Liberty Grace? Let's not be satisfied with shallow truth. "Let us plunge into the stream of grace, immersing ourselves wholly into the life of God" (Spurgeon). Let's remind ourselves every week of what is true and what we're quick to forget.

And when the wolves come – and they will – let's be prepared to silence them because our health, and the health of the church, depends on it.

Father, we want to be a healthy church, and that means we need your truth. Make your truth the mainstay of our life together as a church. Help us to grow in our knowledge of your truth and remind ourselves regularly of it. And help us to know how to spot false teaching and false teachers, and help us to take decisive action when it comes, as it will, for the health of our souls and the health of our church, and for your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.