



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
 Asheville, North Carolina  
 16 October 2022  
 Sermon: Itchy Ears  
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

## 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 (NRSV)

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

“For the time is coming,” says 2 Timothy, “when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.”

What myths tempt you? For what do your ears itch? ‘Itching ears’ is an idiom for curiosity that can only be satisfied (or scratched) by spicy bits

of information. Not to worry - I'll spare you all a demonstration from the pulpit.

For some, it is the modern myth of Christian persecution:

A month after the 2015 Supreme Court decision that ruled that same-sex couples in the country hold the fundamental right to marriage, the late Christian writer Rachel Held Evans wrote the following in a blog post entitled, "For the sake of the gospel, drop the persecution complex":

Did you hear about the pastor who was arrested for not marrying a same-sex couple? What about the publisher that got sued for refusing to censor anti-gay verses from the Bible?

Both of these stories have been exposed as fakes of course, but that didn't keep hundreds of thousands of conservative Christians from sharing them online this week. When I pointed out to a friend that the story he had just shared on social media wasn't true, he replied, "*well it might as well be. Christians in this country are under attack.*"

**It has become a familiar refrain.** We hear it every Christmas when an unsuspecting store clerk wishes the wrong Christian "happy holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas." We hear it whenever a high school drops its traditional pre-football game prayer out of respect for those students who may be Jewish or Muslim or non-religious. An entire industry of books and films has blossomed in the red soil of the American Christian persecution complex...many Christians like to imagine themselves as the scrappy underdogs, bullied and oppressed for their faith yet bravely standing for their beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

The Christian persecution complex has not ended in the seven years since Rachel Held Evans' post. It was in full bloom this week, when self-proclaimed "Christian, Mother, American, Business Owner, and Congresswoman" Marjorie Taylor Green posted the following Tweet in response to radio host Alex Jones being found liable for his lies and

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "For the Sake of the Gospel, Drop the Persecution Complex," July 15, 2015. <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/persecution-complex>.

abuse of the families of children killed in the Sandy Hook Massacre. Jones had said that the Massacre was fake and called grieving parents liars. He was found liable this week for slander and defamation. In response, Representative Green wrote the following:

No matter what you think of Alex Jones all he did was speak words.  
 He was not the one who pulled the trigger.  
 Were his words wrong and did he apologize? Yes.  
 That's what freedom of speech is. Freedom to speak words.  
 Political persecution must end.<sup>2</sup>

Let me apologize. I recognize I just raised the collective blood pressure in the room exponentially. Breath in. Breath out.

Throughout the Epistle of 2 Timothy, the author warns of persecutions:

- Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel (1:8)
- Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David — that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal (2:8-9)
- Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (3:12)

Through the years this theme in the letter has been warped and abused into the myth of the Christian persecution complex, a gospel weaponized to release untold suffering and abuse, especially on those already pushed to the margins, in the name of the faith.

What myths tempt us? For what do our ears itch?

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<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Taylor Green, Twitter post, Oct. 12, 2022. 4:40pm, <https://twitter.com/repmtg/status/1580297479337431040>.

You know what tempts me? Because I am often shocked and embarrassed by the pervasiveness of the Christian persecution complex, I'm tempted with its opposite. Because Christian suffering has so often been weaponized, I'm tempted to leave suffering at the front door of the church. I'm tempted by the myth of 'everything is fine,' never admitting pain in public, especially not in the pew or pulpit.

Does that myth tempt you as well? Perhaps you wonder if this community can be trusted with your suffering? Will it be heard? Am I the only one, amidst all these smiling faces?

But that's the thing about suffering - ignoring it does not erase it. The Wall Street Journal this week reported,

Over the past two years, many Americans have felt time blur: [We] lose track of the day or hour, think more (or less) time has elapsed than actually has, and can't place exactly when a traumatic event actually happened.

It isn't our imagination. Psychology has a term for it: "temporal disintegration"—when the present seems disconnected from the continuity of time—and it plays an important role in how we perceive and respond to trauma.<sup>3</sup>

Trauma is the operative word here. We have been through a collective trauma. And yes, it was a trauma that hit communities unevenly and hit especially hard on communities already pushed to the margins. That itself is part of the compounding trauma of this decade. And no, we haven't come to terms with it yet.

But the effects of these years keep showing up, everywhere, including and maybe especially in Christian communities:

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<sup>3</sup> Josh Zumbrun, "Why Dates and Times Seem to Lose Their Meaning: The Covid-19 Pandemic and other Traumatic Events can Cause Days to Blur, a Sign of Stress," *The Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 7, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-dates-and-times-seem-to-lose-their-meaning-11665135002>.

- In the ways we lose patience with each other, and ourselves
- In the ways we burn out so much faster than we used to
- In the ways many of us have drastically taken stock and changed our lives over the past 2 years
  - 47 million Americans quit their jobs last year
- In the ways we find ourselves needing more rest, more care, more time

At times, it hits me in the middle of the most mundane things:

Monday I was on a stationary bike, listening to a pre-recorded bike instructor talk about her own mental health struggles, and, honestly, in the middle of a workout, I found myself close to tears.

The way she talked about her own exhaustion, the constant questioning and suspicion of self, the feeling like you are all alone, the constant search for an easy escape or an easy answer.

It was cathartic, the way that workouts can be sometimes, when my body finally forced me to feel the feelings that I'm clearly carrying throughout the day but would rather not admit.

And when it was over, and I got off the bike, I had to admit, her words touched on something, something heavy that I'm still carrying, that *we* are still carrying in our different ways. When has it hit you lately? When has it surprised you? The weight of these years that we can't simply walk away from as if nothing really happened.

I am thankful for such moments, for it is in them that 2 Timothy's emphasis on suffering in the Christian life comes back home. Not in a self-serving and abusive persecution complex, but rather in the writer's instruction that we care for one another in and through our suffering.

Yes, ch. 3, v. 12 admits “Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” but then immediately after in v. 14, it says, “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it.” In other words, in the midst of suffering remember the community that taught you about Jesus and his gospel of love and justice. And therefore, teach that love to others in community. Ch. 4, v. 2 “Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.” Don’t gloss over that last part - Be patient with one another. We need more patience with one another, and with ourselves, in the different burdens we carry.

Siblings in Christ, this Epistle’s admonition to stay true to the gospel in light of suffering is not an excuse to cause suffering, but an invitation to stand alongside one another in all that we carry. It is a model for us to be honest about our pain, not leaving our cares and our real selves at the church door.

Yes, we have gone through and are going through hard days that have become hard years, Grace Covenant. But we are not doing it alone.

And in the years that follow, what matters and what we will remember is the love that we experienced in this community, not ignoring, but facing the hardships of our lives. What matters will be the love that we showed one another in the midst of it all. It is that love which will make and remake us into the people of God.