

No Regrets

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[0 : 00] And then we'll head back to that passage. Let's spur our heads in prayer. Lord God, we do come before you and ask for your spirit to be with us.

We thank you that we are born anew by the Spirit of God, and we know that that's a miracle. We know that it is a spiritual act. We know that sometimes it's difficult for us to explain or argue or to put into words, but nonetheless we know it's real, and we know we are changed, and we know we love you and we can serve you, and we know we are forgiven, and we know that there's nothing in ourselves that makes us right, but we have simply accepted your great gift and that your righteousness is what our hope lies in.

And we rejoice and give thanks for the life that we have. We also rejoice and give thanks for our physical lives.

We thank you for the babies that we have here in the congregation, these signs of life and joy that they bring us. And we remember as Christ was born into this world, in the helplessness, as it were, of childbearing and then being a baby, that we thank you for that, and we're amazed at that.

And we also rejoice and give thanks for the new life that we've seen in the congregation over this last year. And we also remember the mums in the congregation who are expecting children, and we pray that you protect them and their unborn child.

[1 : 50] And as we thought about last week at the Carroll service, or at least we've watched the tremendous suffering and the tremendous pain and the tremendous loss and fearfulness of the ongoing refugee crisis from Syria, often made more poignant and painful to bear when we see children and when we see them displaced and homeless and frightened and afraid.

And Lord, we ask and pray that there might be a long-term solution that begins to happen soon politically, but also that compassionately our nations and our peoples and ourselves would do all we can to deal with this great crisis and what is happening here. Remind us, Lord God, not to be complacent and distant and proud.

And while we see these things happening and we see the great loss of life in such a brutal and terrible way, we also remember the shadow of polite brutality happening in our own western world with the taking of so many unborn lives.

And that, I guess, in many ways, Lord comes into focus for us again this week with the conviction of Kevin Wilson, who was convicted of killing an unborn child in the womb through his brutality to his ex-girlfriend.

And we pray that that situation might challenge people about the strange paradox of what is happening and would help us to see what is happening as both immoral and brutal and the worst of all offenses against the most vulnerable and weakest in society.

[4 : 00] Lord, we know it's almost impossible to argue, to speak about, to deal with, but we ask that something like this would begin to make people think about the irrationality and the immorality of what is happening and that we would look to protect the mothers and unborn children and fathers and families, however we do it, not from a trite or proud or pious way, but by recognising the need for healing and hope that comes from Jesus Christ.

And where there is brokenness, then there needs to be healing, and when there is healing, there will be time that is needed. And so Lord, we pray that we would be willing to commit and to serve and to follow you and to follow your ways absolutely and implicitly, bearing the cross and recognising that it will take us out of our comfort zones and will give us conscience that will act compassionately and graciously and sacrificially and in a committed way.

So remind us of these things this evening, these truths about our Christian faith, may we not be overly comfortable and content and at peace at one level as we think about these things, but remind

us that through Christ all things are possible and we take them to you this evening. In Jesus' name, amen. Now I'd like to turn for a little while this evening back to 2 Timothy chapter 4. Stand alone sermon tonight and for the next few weeks it probably will be as different people are preaching, we'll begin the series in Ephesians into the new year and we'll carry on the sermon in the mount also into the new year, but until then some stand alone sermons.

[6 : 09] And this evening we're just going to look at this section that we read together from 2 Timothy chapter 4. And I think it's in some ways it's kind of like a follow on to Job because it's a reminder to us I think in New Testament terms that things aren't always quite what we expect them to be and it might be that as we come towards the end of the year, I know this isn't the last Sunday of the year it is for me preaching, Tom's preaching next Sunday, but we are thinking the older you get the more kind of melancholic you get towards the end of the years you think back in the year and another year older, another year near the grave and all that kind of stuff.

And you often think about just the year that's passed and the kind of year it's been. And I guess for many of us as we look back now having looked forward a year ago, maybe the year has been very different for us than we expected.

It may have been not what we planned and not what we wanted and not what we expected. And in reality I guess that is very often what life is like.

It's like that for all of us to a greater or lesser degree. Things simply, blessing is different from what we expected it to be. Life and circumstances are not what we expected them to be.

And for many, in many ways, maybe that's how it felt for Paul. He's coming to the end of his life and he's been the apostle to the gentiles.

[7 : 50] He's preached, he's lived faithfully for Jesus Christ and yet here he is, he's languishing in a prison and he's about to die. Good cheeries, team tonight about to die.

But he's giving last charges to his young assistant Timothy who in all probability wasn't that young by today's standards.

He would have probably been, he talks about not looking down on any, don't let anyone look down on you because of your youth. He probably was in his mid-thirties. I think that's very young but some of you here might not think that's quite so young.

But he was leaving Timothy in charge of the churches. And in many ways that must have been difficult for him to do because not only did he know his own life was shortly to end but the churches in some ways went in a bit of a mess as well.

There was false teaching in some of the churches. It seemed that Christians were distracted from serving Christ and following Christ. They were looking after lots of different things, lots of things were happening and they didn't seem to be focused on Jesus Christ and there was also persecution.

[9 : 05] There was external pressure on people to give up their faith, to deny Jesus Christ and to go back to the way they'd lived before. So it was difficult for them in their lives.

It was difficult for Paul to be so almost once removed to not be engaged, to not be involved, to not be able to physically and practically be involved in the life of this family, this people that he knew and loved and cared for in the churches.

Very often the same can be true for ourselves in our own lives. It can be true for us as leaders in the church. It can be true that we've looked over the past year and things haven't happened or developed or been as we wanted them to be in the church.

We haven't seen growth and spiritual encouragements that we longed for possibly in the church. And that can absolutely be true for us as people too. The church that you belong to you may feel is in a bit of a mess as well.

You may feel your Christian life is in a bit of a mess. And the plans you've made, whether directly related to being involved in the church or just generally there's been unexpected difficulties and trials and grief and opposition and loss and persecution maybe at a different level, in a different way from different people.

[10 : 36] And it can be that we feel that our Christian lives are in a bit of a mess. And even our involvement in the church, we look round as we think, the church even by our standards is in a bit of a mess and it can be a struggle for us.

So in this section we're just looking very briefly at how God encourages, challenges the people of Paul's day, Timothy and the others, as the letter would have been read, to respond.

And you see it's not really, it doesn't really matter what the circumstances are in our lives. It doesn't really matter what the struggles are in the battles because there will be for all of us.

Struggles and battles and opposition and difficulties of one way or another. We've probably talked a lot about that this year when we've been going through Job. But these things will be there and it's good just simply and very simply at the end of a year to remind ourselves of the basic responses that we're encouraged to consider in our lives.

The New Testament is about giving us the spiritual equipment to survive and to blossom, even in difficulties. So despite our circumstances, not because of them but despite them.

[12:02] Sometimes they may be good, sometimes they may be great circumstances, sometimes they may be awful. There's a kind of sense of levelling that the New Testament encourages us to have a balanced response in whatever happens in our lives through testing and temptation and batterings and good times and bad times.

What is it that Christ wants for us? Well I think it's important to take the teaching that Timothy, that Paul goes to Timothy here and apply it in our own lives.

And we need to remember the importance of being different. Being different. So in whatever happens, we are being asked to respond in a Christ-like way.

So we're different from a natural response. We respond differently maybe from our neighbours or our colleagues who don't have faith and aren't Christians. And verse 5 of this section, Paul says to Timothy, he's highlighting the people who haven't endured and who are following their own passions and who are wandering off from the truth and wandering into myths.

He says, but as for you, he says, but you be different. Since then there was something this week, wasn't there, about a minister in Scotland who said it was about time that we stopped believing all the myths of Christmas and started thinking about the symbolism of it all and what it means and how terrible all the myths were because they just sentimentalised everything.

[13:46] But in a sense, that is what we believe is someone wandering into myths. Because what we believe is, while yes, we recognise it as miraculous and sentimentalised by some people, but nonetheless is hugely, theologically significant and true and historical and real.

And that's on what we base our faith. And so we are to respond differently from those who ditch the truth of God and God's word. And as for you, he says, be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of his advantage to fulfil your ministry.

So there's this contrast that will always be and should always be in our lives, but you. But as for you, it doesn't matter what anyone else is doing, but you, you be different.

As a believer, as someone who is the Holy Spirit, who is someone who is going through difficulty and struggles and battles, don't give up.

Don't change the truth so that it suits your situation. Don't believe in something else which might somehow appear more palatable for us.

[14:56] Enable us in Christ and with the power of the Holy Spirit and being in relationship to Christ, enables us to rise above, ought to, we struggle a lot of the time, but rise above our circumstances and persevere in him and with him.

I'll say a little bit more about that in a minute. But as for you, so he's speaking directly here to Timothy individually. I think we can broaden that out because what we have here is a sense of individual responsibility.

Timothy, you're on your own, as it were, in other words, you don't have me with you, but far greater than that. You have Christ with you, Timothy, but you must remember your responsibility under Christ.

Take responsibility for your life and take responsibility, Timothy, for your soul and your standing before God and your behaviour. Timothy says, if there's no one else in this universe who believes but you, you stick, you still believe, you stay and endure and continue as a believer and as a leader of the churches.

Don't depend on me, don't depend on anyone else, don't depend on your circumstances. It's great advice, it's great advice for us that we recognise at the very beginning we take responsibility for our spiritual lives ourselves.

[16:24] Churches in a mess, we can blame the church. Leaders are a mess, blame the leaders. Circumstances are a mess, blame the circumstances. And it's easy for us to do all these things, but he says, no, you take responsibility for your own soul and stand firm, as for you.

You know, it's that kind of single-mindedness that he wants us to have in our Christian life, that I can't instill on anyone else. I have to battle to instill it in myself and that you must do.

It's just that thing again about sermon listening, is you're just as active listening to God's word as I am preaching it, because we have the responsibility to respond, not to look around and see what everyone else is doing, but what God is wanting us to do in our lives.

But as for me, you know, as for you, he says, and he basically says, be sober-minded, goes on and endure, sovereign into the work of his name and just fulfill your ministry, be sober-minded, be self-controlled, it could be translated or be balanced, be calm.

So it's a different kind of nuances you could use. I think the NIV has keep your head in all situations, keep the head as a believer.

[17 : 48] Keep your head in all circumstances, be sober-minded, know what you believe and stand firm in the Christian faith. How can we do that? How do we stand firm?

You know, is it just a matter of the will? I'm going to stand firm and be stoic. Is it just a matter of doing something ourselves?

How can we stand firm in the faith we've tried, haven't we, and failed? We've got so far and then we've stumbled and fallen again and again. What's the answer to standing firm or being sober-minded, being self-controlled?

Because it's, you know, self-controlled speaks about being in control of our own lives. I think for us the key, a million times over, will be Christ.

Christ is the key. Christ is the key to enable us to keep our head, to be balanced, to be self-controlled, to stand firm. But as for us to do what Christ wants us to do is, He is the answer.

[19 : 00] And I think the answer, and this may be not very expositional exegesis here of this passage, but I think we can see that Paul himself is very much the answer to that.

That is how Paul stood firm, because Christ was significant and important and relational and real to him. And you can't have that once removed. You can't rely on someone else to keep you close to Christ.

You can't rely however important and significant it is to gather together to worship and be part of the Church. You can't rely on that to keep you. Now can you rely on preaching to keep you important, significant though that is?

And accountability to keep you important though that is? It is the important reality of your relationship, your worked-at relationship with Jesus Christ.

And that's what made Paul strong in his own bleak circumstances that he was going through.

[20 : 05] Be sober minded by sensing Christ in our lives all the time. He says in verse 1, I charge you, in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead.

And then he goes on to speak about his own last days almost prophetically there, because he can see them spiritually.

He sees them in a spiritual way. I'm already being poured out as a drink of it. The time of my departure has come. He doesn't say that in a kind of bland or mournful or, you know, my end has come.

I'm going off the stage of life. He sees it spiritually. I fought the good fight, finished the race, I've kept the faith. And he sees a crown of righteousness. Not the end for him, it's the beginning.

He's seeing something greater lying ahead, a crown of righteousness. And he is going to be with the Lord and in the Lord. So there's this great sense in which Paul in his life senses God, senses Jesus Christ.

[21 : 11] That is what enables him to be balanced and self-controlled and to keep the head in the situation he was in. And that is tremendously important in all situations, he says, and encourages Timothy to remember, always be sober-minded.

In every situation, not just when things are great, but in all circumstances, in every situation, remember to be in that way. Because we can sense God's presence. Sensing Him is very important in our lives, in our hearts.

If your life is such that you only sense God's presence for the five minutes that you're praying in the morning before you leave for work after your cornflakes, or if you only sense Him for the short time that you're in church, or you only sense Him for these few minutes that you read the Bible, then we're losing out. If 23 and a half hours of our lives are our own and we don't sense Him, and we're not aware of Him, and we're not praying to Him, which I think is what the New Testament means by

praying on all occasions with all kinds of prayer, praying the Spirit at all times.

It just means sensing and knowing God's presence and seeing everything that happens in the light of our being Christian and being in the presence of God. So if we're down in the pub and we're revising for our exams, or we're speaking to a neighbour, or we're doing some DIY, or we're eating our lunch, or whatever it might be, we can sense His presence, and we know He's part of our lives. Not just someone that we know about, but someone who indwells us, someone who lives in our lives, so that whatever the circumstances are, we can know His comfort and we can know His strength, and we can know that it is not random or pointless, or there to destroy us. It gives us the perspective that we need. And I think that's a very important perspective that enables us, for example, as He says in verse 5, to endure suffering. Paul wasn't in an ivory tower, Paul wasn't some kind of academic part of the academy who just sat in an office and explained theology as it ought to be.

[23 : 43] Paul lived it, Paul suffered. We've seen that, we see that again and again, and we know that he was able to endure hardship because he sensed God's presence.

And he sensed what his life was about, and he could sense that his life wasn't simply a random set of circumstances that were sometimes good, sometimes bad, and ah well, then you die. It wasn't like that for him, because he could see that everything was subsumed into his relationship with Christ, and his death was in the right time spiritually, and he was awaiting the righteous judge. And his life was in that mould, and it was in that reality.

And that for us as Christians is exactly where our lives are. We may be going through darkness and difficulty, but if we have faith in Christ, we know that it is temporary and a struggle in a battle, but our lives, the perspective is beyond this life.

It is not only beyond this life, but it is beyond this life. We do have a crown of righteousness. It's not just looking toward 21.

It's not just looking till we get the career we want, or it's not just looking till we're married, or it's not just looking to when we have grandchildren, but we know and we understand and we appreciate that there is a dimension to our lives that enables us to see as for us, but as for you.

[25 : 16] Think, live and act differently because of what you are in Jesus Christ. So that sensing him enables us to be sober-minded, but I think also what gives us balance is being able to share that truth in our lives. Share Jesus Christ and share the relationship we have with Him.

It's a great thing for sharpening up our faith. It's a great thing for reminding us that it's real, it's not putty. It's reminding us we don't have a plasticine saviour, but we have a real saviour who's changing and transforming our lives, so that we want to be able to share Him with others. Preach, Paul says to Timothy, preach the word, be ready in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort and with complete patience and teaching, for the time is coming when people will not endure teaching.

Now I know that it's in the context specifically here of Timothy who was a preacher, who was a leader, who was a formerly set apart in that way, an evangelist, a leader, but I think the principles here are not just for leaders and for preachers, I think they're for all of us to a greater or lesser degree, because we're all ambassadors for Jesus Christ.

And the important thing in many ways is that you are far more important ambassadors for Christ than I'll ever be. Always that's the case. You are the ones who are living on the front line with all the battles and difficulties throughout.

I am trying to equip and encourage from my ivory tower, but proclaim, share Him as we live our lives.

[26 : 56] That message of good news that we speak about this time of year, but is for all of the year, isn't it? That Christ sends all of us. How will people hear if no one says to them?

How will the people God has planted you beside? The people you rub shoulders with, the people that you see. The people you invited to the carol service last week and they came. We continue to proclaim the truth.

And that we are able to do so. It's difficult. I know that. And it's difficult because we live in days when I think people, sometimes anyway, at least, prefer to have teaching and truth and inverted commas around them, that the rich in years will accumulate for themselves and that suits their own passions.

And I think when we take God's truth and we just twist it and turn it and throw bits out and cut it and get rid of most of it, and that's what we're doing. And so there does come a sense in which we're

asked to proclaim what God has asked us to proclaim.

It's difficult sometimes and sometimes people will reject it. And I think it's probably, and I absolutely include myself in this, it's probably what we're poorest at doing. I think we can be great friends with people.

[28 : 21] I think we can be great coming alongside people. But actually being able to have a reason for the hope that we have and telling them the truth. Gentle and loving, respectful ways is maybe what we're not good at.

I hope that over this year we can spend some time encouraging each other to do one-to-one evangelism with our friends. Maybe do a one-to-one Bible study or something. It's a great thing. There's a lot of tools out there that enable us to do that in a non-threatening as the truth can be way. So the importance of telling people about Jesus Christ and working hard at not just giving religious talk or using religious speak or saying things, the blurting things out, just the sake of blurting it out, well I've told them, but trying to wrestle with how they will hear and what they hear and what it means to them, how we can take that truth and apply it in a way that they will somehow begin to, it will begin to shake their foundations which are not strong and make them think. That's why I was asking, praying about that situation this week. And sometimes things like that that happen in the media or that are reported in the media can become very significant in beginning to shake.

You never listen to Christians and the, for example, the anti-abortion movement because they just see it as the enemy.

But when something like that comes along that will shake people's thinking about what is right and what is fair and what is paradoxical and what is at just and unjust, we need to pray and ask that God will begin to ruffle people and make them think about their situation, their life and who they are.

[30 : 21] So proclaim the truth. I think there must be a sense in which we do that as well. With a degree of urgency we need to always be prepared to share the truth that we have.

Be ready in season, be ready to speak about being prepared, are alert, urgent. So that when we do share the God, when we get opportunities, and we don't often get opportunities, I guess, that people know that for us it's a matter of life and death.

That it's not like a walk in the park. We're not making an after dinner speech to people. We're not sharing with them a knitting pattern or discussing a football result.

We're talking about something that we believe is a life and death matter. And we don't need to shock them or frighten them at that level, but they need to know that the message we have is urgent for us.

Because if it's not urgent for us, it's certainly not going to be urgent for anyone else, is it? And it matters to us, because if it doesn't matter to us, it certainly won't matter to other people.

[31 : 39] And so we're encouraged here as we are to be sober, minded, or keeping ahead to be sensing God and sharing Christ, and doing it urgently.

Be prepared in season and out of season. In other words, really, whether it's our time that we've planned to share the thing or not, whether it's convenient or not, in other words, we're always ready to give an answer.

And for us at that level, there's no off duty. There's no time where we say, OK, right, well, tonight I'm out in my mutes, I'm not going to be a Christian tonight. I'll be a Christian yesterday, and I'll share my faith some bit tonight, I'm just not a Christian.

This is my off season. In season, I'm out of season. This is the off season when I'm not even training.

That in season and out of season is speaking in many ways about not being a hypocrite. There's not going to be a time when you will be sober minded and stand up for Christ, and there's a time when you've taken it off.

[32 : 51] You're no longer a Christian. And maybe a time like this, a time of year like this, is a time we're tempted to do that. And this is a great danger for preachers, of course, to be professional or to try to be professional.

Professional preachers where you can switch off and then not be holy or serve or follow Jesus Christ, however we think about it. But it's hugely significant and important for us that in season and out of season, we're ready to give a reason. So in other words, in many ways we should never be in a place where we'd be embarrassed to say that we were a Christian. Or if the opportunity arose that

we would say, well, I'm certainly not going to say anything about being a Christian here, because that would be completely hypocritical. Whatever it happens to be in our lives, and therefore to look in our lives in that way, because that is partly what enables us to be sober, to be self-controlled, to be balanced, to keep the head in all circumstances.

And we need to share him whether it's convenient or not, and also I think share him patiently. I'll share to Timothy about constantly remembering with complete patience the people he's teaching. And that goes because there's lots of teaching throughout the New Testament about being patient, not ramming things down people's throat and not ramming our needs down God's throat, and ramming our desires for change down God's throat, but be patient, and giving both the results to God and the circumstances we find ourselves to be, not being fatalistic, it's not that we just don't do anything, but we recognise there's things we can't change, and simply all we can do is ask God to give us a strength through them, and still make a request known to him.

The huge blessing of being patient, patient in our lives, and patient in our hearts, and patient with God.

[35 : 03] And then lastly, and very briefly, how do we continue to be sober-minded by sensing him, by sharing him, and I think also by serving him.

In Timothy's case, Paul said, you know, always be so enduro-suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry. As I say to you all, as I pray the Spirit will say to me, fulfil your ministry.

Do what God has called you to do. We all have a ministry, we're all servants, we're all ministers, we're all servants of God. We all have a role to play with our gifts, with our callings, and with our lives.

So I'm hugely grateful for all you do to serve him in this capacity in the church, enabling this family to function, enabling all that we do from week to week, whether it be music or singing or on the door or catering or helping with the children, or 101 other things that simply are gentle acts of service for Jesus Christ.

Keep doing that, keep serving him. Keep doing it with all patience. Fulfill your ministry.

[36 : 27] I encourage you, whatever your circumstances, and sometimes I think we think we only are fulfilling our ministry when there's nothing else that is taking our time or energy from it.

But what you are is your ministry. Where you are is your ministry. Your circumstances are your ministry. Your response is your ministry.

All of that is your ministry. We keep looking for the gold at the end of the rainbow for something to change, for something to be different. Then I'll serve. That will be my ministry.

God, don't you understand I'm here and you're not using me to my full potential. And He says, serve me where you are. Serve me as you sweep the streets. Serve me as you Hoover the home. Serve you do the dishes.

Serve me whatever you are, whatever you're doing, you will find that God is a great God to serve. And therefore we'll be sober-minded and able to stand firm, whatever life has for us.

[37 : 34] And I guess it's looking back on the year, but it's also looking forward to the next year. Whatever God has in place for us, and I'm glad that we don't know in many ways.

I'm glad we don't know. Sometimes you wish you had a little peek, but I'm sure God's right in not telling us what each year has in store for us. But whatever it is, we can be greatly confident in Him as we remain in Him, as we sense Him, as we serve Him, and as we share Him that we will be able to stand firm and know His blessing.

And the title of the sermon is No Regrets. I'm not actually really entirely sure why I called it that, but you wouldn't have any regrets anyway if that's what you're doing. I just finished by reading Romans chapter 8 from verse 31.

What shall we say then to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for his own. How will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It's God who justifies who is to condemn. Christ Jesus is the one who died more than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who is indeed interceding for you and me.

[38 : 56] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword, as it is written for your sake, we are being killed all day long for we regard a sheep to be slaughtered.

No, in all of these things, we are more than conquerors for Him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Is that not great? Amen, let's pray. Father God, we thank you. For your word, we thank you that it is so clear.

We know that we battle and we struggle and often we are plunged into darkness. We know that we fail you and let you down. We know that we are hugely grateful that our faith is not, our salvation is not dependent on our efforts.

Though we pray that we would never use that as an excuse for not making effort in gratitude for what you've done. And that we would move forward, not full of regret or full of impotence, but that we would move forward in dwelling power of the Holy Spirit and with the hope of the gospel and with the joy of knowing Jesus Christ.

[40 : 31] And if we haven't prayed for a long time, help us to pray tonight. And if we haven't confessed our sins for a long time, give us the time this evening to do that.

Just as for you, one to one, as if no one else is in the universe, may we do that. May we find that personal responsibility before you, liberating, freeing, redeeming, renewing, refreshing and reviving. So Lord, help us and forgive us our sins. Forgive us the blindness we often have, the deceit that we often listen to, the pursuits that we follow that are blind, leading us down a blind alley, or that are feeding our pride or our lust, or our self, our grandisement or our self, lordship.

And help us to live by faith and live the miracle, despite the million voices that may be coming in, flooding into our minds and our ears from everywhere around us telling us to curse God and die. Help us not to do so, but grant us victory and joy and faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.