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Preach In Season and Out of Season: A Tribute to Paul and Kay Watson

Aaron Metcalf

It has been a long day already, and Timothy is in low spirits. The work is not going well. The congregation is not what it used to be, and problems seem to mount at every turn. Unhealthy doctrine infects many church members, threatening unity and mission. Church attendance is down, and those who are showing up have their own agendas. They do not come to worship or serve; they turn up to be served. The joy has been sucked out of the community's life.

Some in the church—namely, Hymenaeus and Philetus—have been stirring up trouble, claiming that the resurrection of the dead has already taken place. Where do they come up with this heresy? Timothy is weary of countering these false doctrines. And despite his efforts, confusion still seems to reign. The newer converts to Christ do not know which voices to trust. Members do not seem to care as much about what he has to say. The pressure of ministry weighs heavily on him as the community muddles along. The season is a bad one, indeed.

Timothy's furrowed face reveals that the stress has taken a toll. He senses that he is losing his authoritative voice in the community. With a deep sigh, Timothy opens the newspaper on his desk to the Help Wanted section. He wonders whether it may be time for a career change—it's not the first time he has considered the option. Unfortunately, the ad postings remind Timothy that he is not trained for many of the available jobs. His work history and skill set are narrow. There seems to be nowhere to go, no way to avoid the cyclical storms he finds himself constantly trying to weather.

Timothy buries his head in his hands. Hot tears begin to drip onto his desk. His stomach is tight, his breathing shallow; he feels like a failure in so many ways. Thoughts of his mentor, Paul, come to his mind. He cannot help but feel that he has let Paul down. Paul, in prison now, unable to experience the freedom Timothy has, would know what to do in times like this. Yet Paul is actually *in* prison, while Timothy just *feels* imprisoned. The guilt causes more tears.

Timothy's thoughts flow back to his congregation.

Karen has discovered her husband's affair; he is about to leave her and the kids. How, Timothy wonders, will she make it?

Jason has lost his job. With six mouths to feed and no appreciable skills, he is in a dire situation. He has asked, "Can the church help float us for a few months?" Timothy knows that the church financials do not look good. How will they manage to help Jason and his family?

Then there's the Wilson family, who have recently suffered more loss than Timothy wants to imagine. They lost a child in a tragic accident and a grandparent to pancreatic cancer, and now the mother has been diagnosed with a serious chronic illness. Every Sunday when they come into church, it feels like the shadow of death is cast over them. The sting of death is written on their faces.

Timothy also thinks about Brian, who has been coming into his office every few days to talk. Nothing in Brian's life appears to be wrong, but he is experiencing darkness; he is living in winter for no visible reason. "I don't know why," he recently told Timothy, "but I'm just sad all the time. All I want to do is sleep. My family doesn't cheer me up. My work doesn't cheer me up. I can't pray. . . . I'm just so sad."

As Timothy reflects on all these pastoral needs, all these congregants living through difficult life seasons, he is careful to remember that there are others experiencing good in life as well: the Daly family was just approved for adoption; Dennis recently learned that his cancer is in remission; Juanita has found a loving spouse after years of prayer and searching. There are situations to celebrate in what seems to be a predominately wintery season in the congregation's life.

Still, Timothy's own inner life feels bitterly cold, which makes preparation for preaching *this* Sunday particularly challenging. He wonders aloud, "Is this all worth it?"

When I first decided that I wanted to enter the preaching ministry, my mother bought me a nice leather-bound Bible and carefully wrote these words from 2 Timothy 4.1–2 on the inside front cover:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. (NIV)

I remember receiving the Bible with youthful naiveté, thinking, "Oh, that's a nice passage; she probably picked it because it says 'preach' and I'm going to be a preacher." I had no idea how much I would need these words over the next dozen years of ministry. I had no clue how challenging various seasons would be in my life and in local church ministry.

I now use this Bible for weddings and funerals, ceremonies of new beginnings and final endings. I carry it into hospital rooms to celebrate the births of children and to mourn the news of cancer's return. I open this Bible to teach new followers of Jesus, excited and ready to join the Way. I open it to comfort former followers, hurt and desperate, with little or no faith left. This Bible has been with me through summer and winter—seasons good and bad. More than once I have turned to that first page and read my mom's beautiful handwriting, hearing the apostle Paul's voice speaking to me as he did to Timothy so many years ago.

Did Paul know how much Timothy would need these words in the course of his ministry? Did my mother know just how much I would need them in the course of my ministry as well? I suspect that they both knew.

My mother, the child of a Church of Christ preacher, witnessed life's changing seasons as her father steadily preached God's word. And the apostle, writing from incarceration, experienced the extremes of those seasons firsthand. He knew that Timothy would need to hear this encouragement—that through good times and bad, "in season and out of season," Timothy must persevere in preaching the word of God.

It appears that Timothy was not in a good life season when he received Paul's second letter. Paul acknowledges early on that things are not going well in Timothy's life: "Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy" (2 Timothy 1.4). I must confess that, reading this, I've wondered—why would Timothy's tears lead Paul to anticipate joy? Might Timothy's tears bespeak a deeper story, one that will test and prove his faithfulness during this difficult season?

I've wondered, too, what Timothy thought when he first read these words from his old friend, partner, mentor, and example of what it means to be a minister. Second Timothy is a letter both encouraging and empathetic. Paul relates to the suffering he knows Timothy is enduring; he tells Timothy of his own suffering and then, surprisingly, uses it as evidence that Timothy and the church are on the right track! Indeed, suffering emerges as one of the most explicit themes of the letter. Paul even encourages Timothy to keep on suffering: "So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God" (1.8); and further, "Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2.3).

I imagine that as Timothy read these words, he felt validated and encouraged by Paul. The letter reminded Timothy that he was not a failure; he was doing the work of Christ. And his suffering, his winter season, was evidence of his faithfulness.

It is this faithfulness through the season of suffering that connects Timothy to what God is doing in the world. Redemption comes through this suffering, just as the resurrection came after the death of Jesus. Paul

helped Timothy see the connection between his suffering and the suffering and redemption of Christ, expanding on this in chapter 2:

Here is a trustworthy saying:
 If we died with him,
 we will also live with him;
 if we endure,
 we will also reign with him.
 If we disown him,
 he will also disown us;
 if we are faithless,
 he remains faithful,
 for he cannot disown himself. (2.11–13)

This theme builds toward Paul’s admonition in chapter 4: “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (4.1–2).

There it is. Paul charged Timothy to preach the word no matter the season because God is always redeeming the world no matter the season, and needs people to announce this redemptive presence. God needs people to give the message of his coming kingdom in seasons good and bad—because God is in every season, summer and winter, inviting faithfulness to his mission.

God’s desire is to join his creation in the process of salvation through all of life’s seasons. God needs servants willing to enter into the pain and difficulty of those emotional winter months. Through these servants, God is reaching out to a world often lost in pain, darkness, and sin. Paul, therefore, is grateful for Timothy’s tears, because they are indicators that Timothy is doing the work of God in times of great need and desperation, when God’s children need the most help. Timothy’s tears are evidence that God’s salvation is at work in the winter of his children’s lives.

The summer before I first began preaching every Sunday, I had the honor to work alongside Paul—that is, Dr. Paul Watson—as an intern at the Cole Mill Road Church of Christ in Durham, North Carolina. At the time, Dr. Watson (he’d probably prefer that I call him Paul here) had been serving the Cole Mill Road church for decades. Paul knew a thing or two (okay, much more than that!) about ministry; both he and Kay, his wife, had faithfully walked with the church through the good and the bad.

I remember showing Paul the Bible that my mother had recently given me, with the words from 2 Timothy 4.1–2 written in the front cover. Paul turned the Bible over in his hands and, in his thoughtful way, reflected on the weight, texture, and translation of the Bible—things preachers generally care too much about! But then he saw what my mom had written. He paused for a moment and then said, “More than a nice Bible, you are going to need these words. They will be what gets you through much of ministry life.”

Paul Watson, I knew, was not just spouting rote wisdom. He had lived through many of life’s seasons personally and had joined countless others through their own ups and downs—all the while preaching the word of God faithfully. I had the honor to walk in Paul’s shadow for the summer and watch him work in pastoral ministry. I remember much from that summer (it’s been almost thirteen years now!), but what I remember most clearly is Paul’s steady love of all members of his church body and his steady preaching voice carrying them through life’s experiences.

What Paul taught me that summer was that to “preach” means so much more than to give an insightful homily on Sunday mornings. To “preach” in a local church setting is something much fuller than the act of giving a sermon. I had known for a while, by that summer, that I wanted to go into ministry full-time, but I had not yet seen that this would mean crying many tears for and with other people. Paul showed me the

beauty and wonder of joining people in their winter seasons; he also showed me the beauty and wonder of allowing others to join me in mine. Anyone close to Paul and Kay knows that they live their lives authentically, allowing others to see and join in their own tears. In a word, Paul Watson exegeted with his life the words of Paul the apostle that my mother had inscribed in the Bible she gave me.

Paul has experienced tremendous tragedy (as most in our world have), and he has never covered this up. I clearly remember having a meal with him during which he talked about how his relationship with the members of Cole Mill Road reached a new level of intimacy when he invited them to help carry him through a particularly difficult season in his life. They walked with him through it, and they felt the joy and honor of being able to minister to their minister.

We talked a lot that summer about the Apostle Paul's willingness to allow other people into his own pain, into his own tears. Often, the apostle used his winter season (whether imprisonment, persecution, shipwreck, or many other tragedies) as evidence of the work of Jesus in his life. He believed that God actively works through our winter, our difficult days, and that this brings significant joy. God uses us, even when we are at our worst, to bring a message of hope that ultimately all tears will be wiped away.

I am more thankful to Paul and Kay Watson than I could ever express, because they showed me the power of being present and preaching through all of life's seasons. They showed me what 2 Timothy 4.1-2 looks like when lived out in real time among people we can see, touch, and impact. And it looks beautiful indeed, because God is faithful to his creation no matter the season.

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