

1 Timothy 2:1-7, 22-22

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[0:00] Please do turn back to page 991 and to 1 Timothy chapter 2 and those first seven verses that we had read earlier on.

! So there are 73 days to go until some of you are looking completely blank.

The general election. I wonder what does that fill your heart with when I tell you there are 73 days to go until the general election? Some of you are probably a little weary of it already and you're thinking, oh no, not another 73 days.

Are you among the politically disenchanted who've had enough of the whole thing and those who murmur about the Westminster bubble and how the people in it haven't got a clue about what the rest of our lives are like.

And really, you've just had enough of politics in this country. You're a bit cynical about the whole thing, perhaps. But some of you may think of the next 73 days and the run-up to the general election and all the political debates and things and you may find it really secretly rather exciting and interesting.

[1:06] I think I have to admit to being in that category. As a teenager, I did spend quite a lot of time watching on television the party conferences and all the speeches. And you may think that's very sad.

Why would anyone want to watch long speeches by politicians? I don't know if any of you children here like watching politicians. David Cameron, do you tune in to David Cameron regularly and the Prime Minister to watch his speeches?

Probably that was just me. In my defence, the 1980s was an exciting time to be a teenager because it was the time of Margaret Thatcher and the miners' strike and Arthur Scargill.

So politics were pretty lively in those days. There were battles on the streets with people throwing petrol bombs and the police and would they bring the government down or not. There was the nuclear bomb, of course.

We were living in fairly active fear of being destroyed by nuclear warfare. We were in the height of the Cold War. There was Thatcher and Reagan and Gorbachev. It was a pretty exciting time politically.

[2:02] And I was really into the whole thing. There were clearly opposing ideologies and worldviews clashing in political debate. It was rather exciting. But what are we to make of politics as Christians today?

As we come up to the general election polls or be prayed for our political leaders at different levels. How should we think about political life? And I think one of the things that we can begin with, and we're going to come to find this in the passage in a moment, but let me just state it like this.

That we can expect far too much of our politicians. And sometimes they can promise us far too much, which encourages us to expect too much of them. You see this in political discourse sometimes.

Think back to 1997, those of you who can remember, and Tony Blair and the coming of new labour. New labour, new... Danger. New labour, new danger. Oh! Somebody gave away, so you're not meant to do that.

New labour, new Britain, was the slogan, wasn't it? It's a great promise of newness. It was interesting to hear Tony Blair on the radio recently saying, he thinks they overdid the whole newness thing, because he discovered when you get into power, there's actually quite little that you can do to make things new.

[3:16] New labour, new Britain. Think of President Obama in the United States. What was the whole rhetoric of his great campaign? It was that there was to be a campaign based on hope. Hope

for the future.

You still hear politicians going on and on and on about hope. It's very tempting, isn't it, to think that politics is the thing that will cure everything. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a medicine that you could take, that will cure every disease?

You know, like Calpol does. As you think, what's the child's old? What's the, I've given some Calpol. If that were true, if Calpol could fix everything, if there were a medicine that could fix everything, that would be great, wouldn't it? And it's very tempting to think that political answers are the answers to all of our problems.

And for politicians to think that, and to speak as if they believe that, and as if they can really promise this universal treatment, this panacea for everything that ails us.

I've listened quite a lot to Radio 4, and you find us on the Today programme nearly every day.

There is some problem in British society. What's the answer? Well, who do they phone first? They phone the government, who normally are not prepared to comment on the problem.

[4 : 20] But they try to phone the government to get a minister to come on the problem. So there was a programme, a big thing about obesity in Britain. How too many people are overweight. So who do they phone? They phone the government. So if I'm eating too many pies, whose fault is it?

It's the government's fault. They must do something about it. They must fix it. The assumption is always that the solution lies with the politicians. Now what's that got to do with this passage? Well, a lot with the context that Timothy was in, because Paul is writing this letter to Timothy, he's in Ephesus.

And if you lived in ancient Ephesus, you lived in a culture which was really like our culture in that respect, in that the politicians promised an awful lot in the Roman Empire, and in Ephesus in particular, in fact.

In the first century, the Roman Emperor promised an incredible amount to his citizens. He was, in fact, called God.

And he was called Saviour. Have a look at verse 3 of our passage. Pray for the kings, Paul says. Verse 3, this is good and it is pleasing in the sight of God.

[5 : 31] Our Saviour. But hold on a minute. If you're there in Ephesus in the first century, the Saviour, you've been trained to think, is the Emperor. He's the one who promises you, actually the word was frequently used, salvation.

The imperial cult. The worship of the Emperor. He is God, our Saviour. And also, interestingly, in Ephesus, there was a great cult, the cult of Artemis, and the priests of that cult were described as being godly.

They were the godly. Have a look at verse 2. Pray for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may need a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

But the promise in Ephesus was the daughter of Zeus, it was Artemis. And the Artemis cult that could bring you true godliness. So the priests of Artemis were called the godly.

And they were political figures too. They ruled in the city, these priests. So Timothy was in a city where the Emperor promised salvation, and the cult of Artemis promised that it was the road to true godliness.

[6 : 43] In other words, where will you find the answer to life's problems? You'll find them in Rome, and her Emperor, and in her religion, in the priests of the Roman cults.

Their world was just like our world. It was full of politicians promising far more than they could deliver. The temptation was to hope in the politicians, to look to them for salvation and for godliness.

And you would either do that, if you thought you couldn't do that, because you'd got wise to the fact that the politicians couldn't deliver it, then you'd just say, the world's going with the dogs. It's falling apart, isn't it?

It's just a disaster. And you would become hopeless. Now you can't see this on the surface of the passage. Paul doesn't say here in these seven verses, I am going now to criticise Roman religion as you find it in Ephesus.

But if you lived in Ephesus, and you lived with the Emperor promising you salvation, all day, every day, and the cults promising that they were the way to godliness, well then it would resonate as you read this.

[7 : 51] But here you are to pray for the kings, so that we can live godly lives. You're to do this because it's pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour. And you would know very well, that Paul is implicitly saying, actually what they say they can give you, they can't.

Only God can give you that. And as you read on in the letter, you'd come in chapter 3 to verse 16. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness.

He was manifested in the flesh. So, what is the mystery of godliness? Christ is the mystery of godliness. Where will you find godliness? You'll find it only in Christ, not through the Artemis cult. So, an undertone here in this passage is this strong anti-Roman religion, anti-Greek religion theme. You can't get this stuff from the politicians, from the priests in Ephesus.

God is the Saviour. God is the one who can bring godliness. Godliness is found through Christ, and him alone. And I think the first thing for us to draw from this passage this evening, for our own lives today, therefore, is a warning.

[9 : 00] That in these 73 days, as the political temperature is rising, and more and more is promised, it's almost, you've got to trump the other side, haven't you, with your promises. You know, trump some of those car games, you can trump your Ferrari with a Lamborghini Contash or something.

You can trump that football player with his football players. I'll trump your policy with my policy. I'll promise even more, even more hope. And it's a reminder to us that actually a lot of the things that are promised, the idea that we can find some kind of salvation and some kind of godliness, some kind of right living through what the politicians do for us, is simply not true.

If we are looking for salvation, for a new beginning, for godliness, for a right way of living, then we will find it only in Christ and in God our Saviour.

And that puts the whole of political life in perspective for us. Politics matters, it makes a difference to people, but it can't deliver everything it can tell you that it can deliver.

So I think the first thing to take from the passage this evening is just keep politics in perspective, because only God can give you these things, and the politicians can't.

[10 : 12] As I say, that's a sort of implicit thing that's going on in the passage, not really on the surface of it. On the surface of it, much more is the second point, which is pray for the politicians. Pray for the politicians. Paul says, pray for them.

What are we to pray for them? Let's ask him. Well, it makes sense, doesn't it, to pray about nitty-gritty issues, if there's some big debate in the life of the nation. We should be praying about that. But what's interesting here is that Paul doesn't really look at it from that angle, does he? Have a look at verse 2 again. for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

Very interesting. Why are you to pray for the politicians? Because of the church. We.

That we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. In other words, politics matters, ultimately, because of the church, which is more important than political life.

[11 : 18] The political life of our nation is ordered by God, is designed by God, to serve the life of the church. Now that's very, very odd, isn't it?

Because everything around us tells us, if I said to you, who's the most important person in our country? Who's the most important person? Children, anyone want to suggest? Most important person in Britain?

David Cameron. Good answer. Anyone else? Anyone trump David Cameron? The Queen. The Queen, yes. The Queen. You might trump David Cameron with the Queen. So we are taught, aren't we, to think that what's important in our country is politics.

Yet that the politicians are the really important people. They're the ones with the houses behind gates and the limousines driving them around and the smart suits going to important meetings with other important people to talk about the future of the world.

And the church. How important does the world think the church is? Basically utterly irrelevant, isn't it? The church, I mean, who are you?

[12 : 23] Look at you, you motley crew. You few gathered here. We're nothing in the eyes of the world. But Paul says, hold on now, let's see what Paul says here.

He says, pray for the kings and those who are in high positions so that the church can get on with living its life. that it may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

It's the other way around. The really significant thing in God's purposes is the life of the church. And the work of the politicians is all that is designed to enable the church to get on with its life.

So that we may live godly lives. The politicians are to provide a space, if you like, an arena, in which the church can live its life.

That is entirely the opposite way around from the way that the politicians think about their work and the way we're tempted to think about their work. The politicians, in that sense, serve the church.

[13:29] So that the church is not something utterly marginal and on the edge of society and not really very important. The church is actually at the centre of God's purpose for the world. And other things are designed around it.

the state, the political life of the nation is there to serve the church so that we can get on with living our Christian lives. God's purpose. So that's what we're to pray.

I wonder if you ever pray that. Would you take the words of 1 Timothy 2 verse 2 and pray them?

Heavenly Father, I pray for kings and all who are in high positions so that we Christians may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

Would you do that, Heavenly Father? Would you so overrule in all of their planning and thinking and politicking that we might live a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way?

Do you pray that for politicians? You've got 73 days before the general election. Why don't we make that our prayer for our government? Something to pray then for the politicians, secondly.

[14:41] But, as we head towards my last two points, I need to tell you really this passage is not about politics at all. We've landed in the middle of it, haven't we, really, in verse 2, which is almost a bit in brackets.

It's not what the passage is about. The passage is around something else because it begins with a much bigger vision, doesn't it, in verse 1. So let's step back. I only landed there because it's on our minds, isn't it?

We're thinking politics. We're in the middle of a general election campaign. But actually, we begin in verse 1. First of all then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people.

He doesn't start with talking about politicians. He starts by saying, pray, and he uses a whole variety of words for praying there, pray for all people.

And then in brackets he says, even the politicians. Pray for all people. Now why? Why does Paul need to come in this second chapter to tell them to pray for everyone?

[15:43] And a bit of background from chapter 1 will help us here. It seems that there were people in the church there in Ephesus who were trying to make people keep the Old Testament law as the Jewish law and had a very, very exclusive view which tried to keep some people out of the church.

So in chapter 1 we find a discussion of people who are really, really interested in myths and genealogies. Chapter 1, verse 4.

Probably Old Testament genealogy. You know there's lists of names in the Old Testament. They're really into studying lists of names. Now for us today this is very odd, isn't it? Because we tend to look at lists of names and not be particularly interested in them. We find them a bit baffling.

What do we do with all those lists of names in the Old Testament? But they were really into the lists of names. You might know some people who are really into tracing their family history. It's a bit like that. Really into it.

And myths. And they're also really into telling people to keep the law, verse 7. They were desiring to be teachers of the law. In other words, they were telling people they needed to live like Old Testament believers.

[16:50] Keeping the law. As it was kept in the Old Testament. So it seems that this was a sort of exclusive Jewish style heresy in the church.

Of people saying, no you must live like Jewish people lived in the Old Testament. That's how the church lived today. And Paul seems to come in there with that background in chapter 2 to try to expand the view of Timothy and the Ephesians.

To say, no, no, no. It's not about this little pocket of people here who live like Old Testament believers. It's about everyone. Stop being so exclusive. Understand that God is interested in all people.

And you get this repeatedly in that passage, don't you? Do you see that? Verse 1. Thanksgiving, prayers, etc. Be made for all people.

Verse 2. For kings and all who are in high positions. Verse 4. Well it's good. It's peaking in the sight of God our Saviour who desires all people to be saved.

[18:00] Verse 6. Jesus Christ, or Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all. Do you see this repeated? All. Do you get your highlighter? Don't do it because it's a church Bible.

But highlight the alls and you'll see there are lots of them. All, all, all, all, all Paul is saying. Pray for all of them because God wants all to be saved.

Christ is a ransom for all. In other words, don't think it's about this little group, this narrowly defined group. The vision of the Gospel is a global vision.

Now we do need to think for a moment about the meaning of this word all. Because all in the Bible can mean different things. And I want to show you this evening that all here means really all kinds of people.

All kinds of people. Now just put yourself back in the first century for a moment. Here you are in the church in the first century. One of the mind-blowing things if you were there in the first century is that God's plan now seems to include who?

[19:08] The Gentiles. Ah, the Gentiles. People from outside of Abraham's family. They seem to be part of God's plan of salvation. And for many, many in the first century, especially Jews who've become Christians, this was really hard to get your head around.

And you can understand why, can't you? For more than 2,000 years, who's God been working with? The Jews. Abraham's family. Okay, there are small numbers of Gentiles come into the people of God in the Old Testament.

But basically, it's been the Jews. They are the chosen people. And then suddenly in the first century, Jesus comes and the Gospel goes to all kinds of people.

Even the Gentiles. Now Gentiles were thought of as dogs. Now you may think, dog, well that's a compliment. But it's not, in the first century, dogs is not a compliment. Dogs in the first century are wild, dangerous, diseased creatures.

They didn't have lovely fairy pets as they groomed and had their own cemeteries and things in the first century. Dog is definitely really, really bad in the first century. So to think of the Gentiles as dogs, as you find in that episode in the Gospels, for example, is a real insult.

[20:21] But that's how they've eaten. But suddenly, they seem to be in God's plan to save. And this was mind-blowing. Even Peter couldn't get his head around it. So that he didn't want to eat with Gentiles.

And Paul had to tell him off for it. But it's very hard for them to comprehend this inclusive vision of God for the Gentiles.

So when you read in the New Testament, all of these statements that you get, like John the Baptist says, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. What do we think world means there?

Well, world is saying, effectively, even the Gentiles. Not just the Jews now, but there's a lamb, there's a sacrifice. Because of course, all those many animals killed in the Old Testament were killed for Israel, for the Jews.

But now, there's a lamb for the world, even the Gentiles. And you read on in John's Gospel. The Samaritan woman meets Jesus, not a Jewish lady. He says, I found the saviour of the world, she says.

[21:20] Okay, so world means even the Gentiles. And that's why Paul ends the way he does in verse 7. Do you see that? For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle, a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

His whole ministry has embodied this universal vision, this all, this even the Gentiles vision. Striking in verse 6 when Paul says that Jesus gave himself a ransom for all.

In the other places where Paul talks about Jesus dying for, he normally says for us or for me. But here he says for all. Because in this context he's wanting to say don't limit this vision of God to one people to the Jewish way.

It's even the Gentiles. Jesus paid the ransom price when he died on the cross to set all kinds of people free.

Brackets as an aside. If you're a sophisticated reformed theological type and you understand what I mean when I say the doctrine of limited attendance and you're wondering how it fits, well there's your answer.

[22 : 32] all types of people. If you didn't get that, don't worry. All, even the Gentiles.

And so Paul says, verse 1, pray for all. That's the headline of the passage. Pray for all. Because that is God's plan. His plan is to save all kinds of people from the ends of the earth.

Don't limit provision. And from that I draw out concluding two thoughts for you to take away and meditate on this week.

First one's this. What is the scope of your prayers? What's the scope of your prayers? As an individual for example, just think about what you prayed for in the last few days. I wonder if you're praying in the last few days.

It's been quite parochial really. Have you prayed for the mission to the Gentiles in any form? For God's great plan to save people from the ends of the earth?

[23 : 41] I think of a lady we know who was asked if she could come up for dinner or something one evening and she said no I'm sorry she checked and said I'm sorry I'm praying for China that evening.

On her own at home booked out to pray for China. Think of another retired couple that we know of and I don't take this the wrong way but a retired couple leading relatively quiet lives so you imagine they could have time to pray for things fairly easily.

I know some retired people are super busy they don't want to offend you if you're retired. Anyway I'll move on. Here they are a retired couple quiet lives but they skip lunch on Wednesdays so they can spend more time praying for the world.

Where's the mission to the Gentiles in our praying? Where's the big all in our praying? Does it embrace the rulers? Do we pray for the rulers as individuals do we pray for the rulers or do we just listen to the Today program and tugged up about them and what a bad job they're doing?

So what's the scope of our praying? I don't want to I suppose in a sense I do want to leave you feeling guilty if you need to be convicted of your prayerlessness then you should feel guilty perhaps. But I want to encourage us really positively with a great vision of God's saving plan because that's what Paul's doing here.

[24 : 58] It's not a beat you up passage it's a look at what God is doing. God our saviour who desires all people to be saved even the Gentiles so that I'm a missionary to them.

I'm an apostle for them Paul says. Lift your eyes to the scale of God's purposes and be encouraged to pray in accord with that. Would you pray for as a family?

How could you as a family pray more on this scale? Well there are obvious things we could do aren't there? I think it's wonderful we've seen a lovely example in our church of a family who've adopted a cause in Nepal over the long term and over the years actually they've flown out there to be there some of the family but you wouldn't need to do that but they've raised money, they've brought it to the awareness of the church, they've prayed and prayed and prayed for this concern. And I think adopting causes is a great thing to do because it stops it being hit and miss if you have a longer term sustained interest in something. So do you as a family perhaps? Could you as a family adopt a cause?

We had a lovely example of that this morning at church of a nine year old girl who's had a great burden on her heart about Malawi and the floods there and they've got missionary friends there in that context and so she was organising a cake sale to raise money for them.

[26 : 14] I think that's a great example of a family, in this case actually quite led by the excitement of the child, adopting a cause in the long run that they can be committed to and can pray for.

And there are ways we could adopt countries out there and use books like Operation World to take a sustained interest in a country about a child giving a report from reading a bit of Operation World and bringing it to the family and saying let's pray for it.

I said that, we've not done that, but it seems like a great idea to do it. And what about a church, as a church? How big is your vision as a church?

I was glad to hear Paul pray for politicians and for Christians in other countries. We need to be doing that regularly, don't we? I'm sure you are, I'm sure you just didn't do it because you knew what the passage was this evening. But we need to keep doing it as a church, don't we?

We need to persist in praying and again I think the more concrete we are, the easier it is probably to do it. We mustn't become parochial because God is not parochial. We must pray for all people because that is the scale of God's purposes.

[27 : 18] So what's the scope of our prayers? And then lastly, what about our exclusivisms? And you're going to have to do the work here because I don't know you well enough to know what the answer is really.

Their exclusivism here was a Jewish kind of exclusivism. It was an exclusivism focused on genealogies and the law of the Old Testament and wanting people to keep that and trying to exclude the nations, the Gentiles.

That's highly unlikely that that's the problem here or a temptation here. What are our exclusivisms? Who do you exclude? There are different possibilities.

I think in our church for example it's full of young people. We know as a culture that we are really into youth, aren't we? So it seems to me an obvious danger for a church is that it grows among the young.

I mean by young I mean sort of under 50. just to keep myself in the young. But it's cool to be young isn't it?

[28 : 20] So think through our culture. What is our culture into? Who does our culture exclude? Well actually our culture is quite good excluding the elderly because it thinks the action is where the young people are. So could a church do that?

Now you need to help me here because I don't know what the answer is. What exclusivisms might tempt you here? can function in all sorts of different ways. It can function economically and socially can't it?

The exclusivisms of middle class materialism that if you don't have quite the right kind of house or car or job you feel slightly uncomfortable in a church because you just don't feel that you fit in. Do we gravitate to people like us, PLU, and welcome them especially? What do we do with the odd in our church? Who do we exclude?

Well who does God exclude? He doesn't. There is no type of person who is excluded by God and his plan.

[29 : 18] You think back to chapter 1, Paul describes himself as the worst of sinners. He's in. Are some people too bad in our minds to be included?

In the church we're preoccupied because our culture is preoccupied by kinds of sexual sin. What if someone like that walks into our church? In our culture we've narrowed the definition of evil very strongly haven't we?

But there are still some people in society who we know are evil. What do we do with them as a church? Do we pray for people like that to be saved? Or do we actually have our own secret set of exclusions?

You're going to have to go away and think about this. Because I can't tell you in your life as a congregation what your particular temptations are. It's the deficiencies of being a visiting preacher. But think about that.

Who might you corporately exclude? What are your exclusivisms? And then we need consciously and deliberately to pray beyond those boundaries.

[30 : 21] To pray for all. Because God wants all kinds of people to be saved. And Christ has paid a ransom price for all kinds of people. Even those people you identify as beyond the pale of those points.

And that of course is good news for us all isn't it? Because that means there's hope for us. Because he doesn't exclude us either. And so we give thanks as we're encouraged here to remember the great global plan of God reaching to the ends of the earth and all kinds of people.

As we're reminded to pray for all kinds of people we give thanks. That that means that the gospel has come to us. Even people like us. And if we're not Christ's then we're reminded by this passage this evening that the gospel is for all kinds of people and you cannot exclude yourself.

And so this passage with its great vision of God's plan to save from the ends of the earth stands as an invitation to us to come to Christ.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together.