

Comfortable in 2015

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[0 : 00] I wonder how you are going to measure your 2014. There is an involuntary reflective impulse that we have at this time of year. Everything around us is telling us to think over the last 12 months and decide whether or not we're happy.

Television shows are giving us recaps of the events of the year. Facebook, if you're on there, is giving you a slideshow of what you've put on there for the last 12 months. Some of you know that because I've seen yours.

Everyone is telling you to look at what has been happening and decide how you're going to feel about that. Has it been a good year or a bad year? I wonder if as you sit here this morning and maybe for the first time start wading through the memories of the past 12 months, is it a year where you would say that God has delivered on his promises to you?

Is it a year where you can sit back content and thankful? And I wonder in light of that, what is it that you'll be praying for going into the new year?

Resolutions, great idea. Prayer, even better idea. What is it that you'll be asking God to put into your life for the next 12 months? Or maybe what is it that you'll be asking God to keep out of your life for the next 12 months?

[1 : 14] There is a good chance that how you measure this year and what you pray for next year will have something to do with the ratio of pain and comfort.

There is a good chance that if this year you have had more comfort than pain, then you're probably on the positive side of the ledger. And there is also a fairly good chance that as you pray for next year, you are praying for more comfort than pain.

And that is because we have become so conditioned as a society and as people to avoiding pain that it is the strongest impulse, the strongest dictator of what it is that we're after.

Our lives are completely designed to avoid pain. Right from our very beginning, we're getting softer. Slowly but surely, we're getting softer.

I remember taking my wife about six years ago to get her wisdom teeth out. And we went to the dentist and I was quite impressed that the dentist was encouraging my wife to just get them out in the chair.

[2 : 19] Don't worry about the general anaesthetic. Just sit here. It'll be much quicker. It'll be fine. But then she was given a small anaesthetic needle to numb the area where the actual anaesthetic needle would go in to numb the area where the teeth would be taken out from.

And I thought, isn't that a little bit redundant? I mean, you're still getting a needle to numb you for the needle that you're going to get to numb you later on. We are so scared of pain, we will do anything to avoid it, that we have gotten to the point where we need painkillers for our painkillers. We are slowly but surely becoming softer. Now, I'm not saying that I am any better or tougher than my wife. I'm sure I would have welcomed the first needle in preparation for the second needle. But can you see that there is a danger for us? When we become pain averse, when we become pain avoiders, pain becomes something that drives us to be bitter.

When pain does come, we become angry. We feel like some injustice has been done to us. And the same is true when it comes to our relationship with Jesus. When pain comes, we feel like it's out of place.

[3 : 31] But we've decided that following Jesus is supposed to be comfortable because that's what we want in our lives. We want comfort. We want to avoid pain. And so we've told God that's how it should be.

And so we look at our last 12 months. And if there's pain, we think, God, you kind of failed a bit this year. You kind of missed the mark. You didn't comfort me like you said you were going to.

You didn't look after me like you said you were going to. We've even got faith that God will make our life comfortable. We've gotten to the point where we pray that God will make our life comfortable.

But I want you to entertain the thought just for the rest of this morning that maybe God has something better than comfort designed for you. God actually wants something for you that is more satisfying and more edifying than a life that is pain free.

And I think that Hebrews 12 helps us to see exactly what it is. Have a look at verse 4 with me. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

[4 : 38] In the Christian life, we struggle with sin. Well, at least we're supposed to struggle with sin. I read that verse and it talks about resisting temptation to the point of shedding blood.

I don't think I've resisted temptation to the point of quickening my heart rate, let alone actually shedding blood. We resist until it's uncomfortable because that's what we've conditioned ourselves to think the Christian life is supposed to be.

Think about it. With something like reading your Bible. We know that we're supposed to do it. We know that it's helpful. We know that God wants to speak to us. And so we try and discipline ourselves to have our daily time in the word.

But as soon as it gets difficult, we're tired or we're busy. We quickly reason that if God had wanted me to read the Bible every morning, he would have made me a morning person.

As soon as it gets uncomfortable, we start to think, well, maybe this doesn't belong in my Christian life because comfort must be what God wants for me.

[5 : 43] Or what about the war against sin when it comes to confessing sin? The Bible's clear that confessing sin to one another is helpful. Confessing sin to God is essential.

But what about when that sin is embarrassing? What about when you're still struggling with that sin and you haven't yet overcome? We're very good at confessing the sin that we have dealt with in the past and that we are now masters of.

But what about the sin that you're struggling with right now? What about the sin that I'm struggling with right now? It's a bit uncomfortable to acknowledge that we're weak or imperfect.

And so our struggle against sin won't even push past the comfort barrier, let alone struggling with sin to the point that we shed our blood. We struggle until it gets hurt, but until it hurts.

But we've got to understand we need to get rid of this idea that God's design for you is comfort in this life. God has something far better than comfort.

[6 : 47] And so we need to let go of the idea that comfort is the highest ideal. We need to understand that our God has more in store for us than a pain-free life.

In fact, God even promises, Jesus promises to the disciples that if they follow him, they will suffer. They rejected the Saviour and they will reject the followers of the Saviour. God is not the grandfather who just lets you off all the time.

He's not the grandfather who gives you lollies in spite of the fact that your parents have said no more lollies at Christmas. God is our heavenly father. And being a heavenly father means getting us to a better destination than comfort.

And verse 5 explains it. You have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons. My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves.

And he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline. God is treating you as sons, for what son is not disciplined by his father?

[7 : 56] If you are not disciplined and everyone undergoes discipline, then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we've all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it.

How much more should we submit to the father of our spirits and live? Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best, but God disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness.

The discipline that God brings into our life, the pain and the struggle and the difficulty, even when we don't realise it, is actually God's goodness to us.

It is God's gift to us. Now, it's not pleasant at the time ever. No discipline is pleasant at the time, but it is here for our good according to God's word.

For those of you who are parents or grandparents, you know what it is like to watch your young child or grandchild wander off and do things that are dangerous for them. My son is a runner. [8 : 56] That's what he does. In public places, he runs. If you're at the library with him, he will go and sit on a stranger's lap and ask them to read him a book. Sounds cute, but it's incredibly dangerous.

If we're in the park and there is not a fence, the only place that he wants to be is on the road that goes around the park. If we're in a crowd, he doesn't want to be with mum and dad. He wants to be weaving through legs. And so it is essential for me to discipline him.

He's not happy when I discipline him, but it is essential for me to love him by disciplining him and drawing him back. He thinks he's invincible.

What he wants from me is the freedom to do anything and to be somehow protected from any pain that will come. And the problem is we're a bit the same. We need discipline from God, and even though it hurts, God is giving it to us for our sake.

And so I wonder, as you look back over the last 12 months, if there are things that maybe you've been angry at God about, maybe even right now you are wrestling with God about, that may be a gift from him for your sake.

[10 : 06] The purpose of it is there in the end of verse 10. It says, Or in verse 11, Discipline and struggle and hardship in this life are gifts from God so that we may grow in holiness, so that there might be a harvest of righteousness in our lives.

That is the better thing that God is preparing for us. God is transforming you to be holy. His desire for you is not to put your feet up and be comfortable, but that you might grow in holiness, that you might be more and more like Jesus.

That's the work that God is doing. The reason that Jesus came to earth and suffered and died and rose again was not so that your life would be pain free.

The reason Jesus came was so that you would be in heaven, so that you could be forgiven, so that you could spend eternity with God and Christ in heaven. And so now, his agenda is not to keep you away from pain.

It's to do whatever it takes to transform your mind and your heart and your life in preparation for heaven. It is to make you more in love with God.

[11 : 47] It is to open your eyes more and more to the sufficiency of Jesus, to the satisfaction that is in him in spite of the pain and suffering that you might face, to the satisfaction that is found in him over and above any earthly joy that you may currently enjoy.

It might be painful. In fact, it will be painful. But it's worth it. It's not unlike exercise. At this time of year, gyms make a lot of money making people sign up after the regret of eating too much or not doing enough exercise or the New Year's resolution of getting fit and healthy.

I've been suckered into this many a year. And it's interesting how much pain there is when you start an exercise routine. You know, at first, it's just maybe two laps of the oval running around, and that's quite painful.

In fact, for me, every year playing football, we start training again in February. And because I haven't trained at all since we stopped playing in September, there is a betting ring in the football club that I play for for how long it will take for Sam to throw up in our first training session.

It's a testament to the fine condition that I'm in. And usually it doesn't take very long. I run for a few minutes, and all of a sudden I've got no oxygen in my body, things are not good, and I'm on the ground throwing up, and everybody thinks it's a right laugh.

[13 : 09] There is a lot of pain when you begin doing exercise. But as you continue through that pain, rather than avoiding it, as you persevere in that pain, the result is that your body becomes healthier.

Your body is conditioned. Your body is equipped to then do more exercise. I always think that I'm fit at the start of the year until somebody points at me and says, you have to run a little bit faster or run a little bit more.

Following Jesus will have painful moments, and we have a choice. Do we run from those and stay exactly as we are, soft and fearful?

Or do we persevere and endure as we're encouraged to hear? So that, in verse 12, we strengthen our feeble arms and weak knees.

When it comes to holiness, when it comes to following Jesus, the reality is we are all weak and feeble. There is so much growth for us to do, but the problem is, rather than recognise our need for growth, we look at somebody who we think is weaker and more feeble than us, and we think, I'm okay.

[14 : 30] So I don't need the pain that they need. I don't need to run until I throw up like they do. I just need to avoid pain, turn up to church, tick the box of being a reasonably nice person.

But God's desire, God's design for you is not for you to be a pain-free, nice person. God's heart for you is that you would be transformed to be like Jesus so that you can spend eternity in heaven. That is what he is doing for you. And so we need to stop looking at people around us. We need to stop assessing our past 12 months or our life or our future based on what God is or isn't doing in other people.

We need to be looking at our own life and asking the questions, am I more like Jesus now than I was 12 months ago? Am I more generous now than I was 12 months ago?

Am I more humble now than I was 12 months ago? Am I more honest about sin than I was 12 months ago? Just being better than the people around us is not God's design for us and so in his grace he will keep disciplining us to break that pride.

[15 : 41] He will keep sending struggle and difficulty because God wants you to be like Jesus. And that is a far better goal than you having a comfortable next 12 months.

The promise in Philippians 3 is that our lowly bodies will be transformed to be like his glorious body. The end goal of God's work in your life is that you will be made completely perfect.

You will be completely purified and you will spend eternity in heaven. What you've got to grasp, what this passage in Hebrews is telling you is that the journey from where you are right now to that destination will be painful.

It will require discipline. The discipline of a loving heavenly father who wants more than anything for you to be forgiven.

Who wants more than anything for you to know the joy and satisfaction of heaven. And so again, I want you as you come to reflect on this past 12 months to ask yourself the question, am I more like Jesus now than I was 12 months ago?

[16 : 52] Why? Because that is why God sent his son. That is why Jesus died. To begin a transforming work in you.

How much has it been on your radar this year to see that you are growing in humility? How hard are you wrestling with issues like sexual purity? Generosity?

Honesty? Servant-heartedness? When was the last time that you prayed fervently and seriously and for an extended period of time for an area of your character?

We pray when we're sick. We pray when we're poor. We pray when we're anxious. We pray when we're... And it's good and they are all valid reasons to pray. They're prayers that God loves to hear. But I do want to ask you the question, when was the last time you prayed fervently for an area of your character? You went to God daily, passionately begging him to break the pride that's in you or to purify your mind?

[18 : 05] Your holiness matters to God more than anything else. One of the great encouragements of being a Christian is that God's issue is not how good or bad you are.

If this is heaven, God's issue is not whether or not you're here or here. His issue is that you're moving towards here. The direction that you're going.

That you're actually pursuing the growth that God is trying to work in your life. That's why the spirit dwells in you. It's a promise guaranteeing your future inheritance, but it is also God's power at work in your life transforming you in preparation for it.

God is in the business of getting you to heaven and he will do whatever it takes to get you there, including bring pain and discipline in your life if that's what's needed. That's what real love looks like.

Real love looks like doing the hard things, even the painful things, in order to make sure that those you care about get to where they need to go. I remember when I, some of you have told you this before, when I first took a job in ministry, so this was my dream job, I got offered the job as youth pastor in the church that I was converted in, in the youth ministry that I'd been a part of for many years and the week that I was starting, so they were going to announce that I was the youth pastor, I got rushed to hospital with a sore stomach.

[19 : 40] Over the course of a few days, they took my appendix out and figured out that that wasn't the problem and then they found out that I had Crohn's disease. I knew nothing about Crohn's disease and if I'm really honest, I still don't know that much about Crohn's disease apart from the fact that it's there, it's not going anywhere, I'm going to have it for all of my life and it puts physical limitations on me for the rest of my life and I remember being absolutely livid with God.

I had just been given my dream job and I was ready to throw every ounce of energy that I had at this job and God had just removed a whole bunch of those ounces of energy. He'd just taken away my physical health in a way that was going to have an impact on my life and ministry for the rest of my life and ministry.

But now, almost 10 years later, I can already see the love that God had in doing that. I wouldn't have chosen it if he'd given me the choice but I can see that it was a gift from God to remind me that no matter how many ounces of energy I have, ministry is about his power and not mine. No matter how committed I feel, following him is about his grace and not my strength. And because God is more committed to getting me to heaven than me being comfortable, he did what was painful out of love.

And you've got to understand, God is in the business of getting you to heaven and out of love he will do whatever it takes, including bringing pain and struggle. So the question is, how do we avoid becoming bitter when God places things in our life that we wouldn't have chosen?

[21 : 24] As we reflect on this year, how do we convert disappointment into gratitude when we begin to see the God who loves us enough to give us hard things?

Well, I think the key starting point is to remember this. God has not promised that he will make you comfortable. God isn't even trying to make you comfortable.

It's not on his radar. His priority is your holiness. That's what he cares about more. Because as you grow in your Christ-likeness, as you grow in your love for God and your love for Jesus and your joy in him, the pain will diminish a little bit.

It'll still be there, but you'll know the satisfaction of heaven. You'll know the satisfaction of being loved by God even though you don't deserve it. of being loved by God in a way that you can't actually lose.

You will know the security and peace of your eternal destiny. The goal for your life is not comfort. It's bigger than that and it's better than that. The goal for your life is heaven. The key for us as we reflect on the year that's been and as we prepare for the year to come is that we have right expectations when we come to Christ.

[22 : 42] We have the expectations that line up with what is promised and that is that our Heavenly Father will discipline us so that we grow in holiness.

The key for us to not grow bitter is thankfulness. When you begin to understand that even the difficulty that you're facing right now or that you have faced this year is actually a gift from God in order for you to get to heaven, you have much to be thankful for.

And lastly, the key is endurance. This passage opened up encouraging us to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith who for the joy set before him endured the cross scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The model we have is a saviour who became human, who suffered like us, temptation, opposition, persecution, but continued to gratefully trust his Heavenly Father because he knew his destination. As you reflect on the year that's been and as you pray for the year to come, let me encourage you as the writer of the Hebrews does, God's goal for you is holiness, not comfort and that is a far better goal.

[24 : 17] So what is there that you need to thank God for that maybe you've spent the past 12 months complaining about? Or what things do you maybe need to add to your list of prayers for the year to come?

Would you be so brave and so trusting as to ask God to do whatever it takes to break down your pride? Whatever it takes to grow your generosity?

Whatever it takes to enable you to love your enemy? Those are dangerous prayers, but prayers that God loves to answer for your sake and for your joy.

Let's pray to finish. Father God, we want to confess that it is just easier to worry about comfort. We want to confess that we do go there first and we want to ask that you would open our eyes to the better path that you've prepared for us. May we know greater joy in growth in holiness rather

than in comfort.

[25 : 25] May we pursue holiness with the same fervor that we have pursued comfort. May we pursue you with every ounce of energy that you give us. Father, we thank you for your love.

We thank you for the confidence we have that even the painful times are a gift from you because you have shown us in Jesus that you will withhold no good thing from us. Help us to want heaven more than anything else.

Help us to recognise your hand in the difficult times and to endure trusting your goodness and your plan. Thank you for Jesus, our model and our anchor.

Help us to keep our eyes fixed on him in the year to come. Amen.