

Hebrews 12:1-17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 September 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1 to 17 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted the point of shedding your blood.

And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him, for the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children, and not sons.

Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us, and we have respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them.

[1 : 2 3] But he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Therefore, lift your drooping hands, and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled, that no one is sexually immoral, or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. Following the great list of the forerunners in the faith in chapter 11, chapter 12 points us to the one in whom the entire story of faith reaches its climax, Jesus Christ, the pioneer and the perfecter of faith.

He does not just run the way of faith himself, he also trailblazes the way to its heavenly destination. He is both our example and our deliverer. He both leads the way and clears the way.

[2 : 3 9] He opens our way to approach God here and now, but is also the high priest who establishes our final and complete access to God's presence. The way of faithfulness is most perfectly exemplified in him, but he is also the one to whom our faith looks as its object.

Without the salvation of Christ, faith would be in vain. The promise and the deliverance to which it looks would not be realized. In this respect, Christ is both like and unlike those who live by faith.

He faithfully obeys and perseveres through suffering, but while his people must depend upon his work by faith to have a way to God, he is the one who creates this way for them as the faithful son.

He does not need this way himself. Rather, he takes flesh and suffers so that he might furnish a way for others. The author of Hebrews paints a picture for his hearers of a race before a vast audience, but not just of mere spectators.

This is like a relay race of faith, with each generation passing on the baton to the generations succeeding them. We saw this relay race in the preceding chapter, where generation after generation the people of faith passed on the torch of faith to those after them.

[3 : 50] Now these persons who have completed their leg of the uncompleted race are watching us run ours. They exemplify what faithfulness looks like, and we look forward to Jesus, who has blazed the trail ahead of everyone to the finish line.

He has brought the entire race of faith to its glorious completion. In him we see an example of faithfulness in extreme suffering, and an example of one who overcame through suffering.

He endured the shame of the cross, a death that was ignominious and humiliating, but also a death in which he bore the shame of mankind, the sin by which man lacks integrity and is cut off from God's face.

He entered into our condition and bore our condition. And he did so for the joy that was set before him. The shame of the cross is set over against the joy that is awaited beyond it.

And here we have a similar contrast to that which is drawn in 2 Corinthians 4, verses 17-18. For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory, beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen.

[4 : 58] For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. Christ is the one who can look beyond the shame of his death. He can look beyond and see the power and the promises of God, and as a result can persevere through suffering.

In this respect, he is the example to all who would follow. The author of Hebrews wants his hearers to consider the example of Christ, lest they become weary and faint-hearted.

Compared to the sufferings of Christ, their sufferings have been relatively minor. They've not yet had to shed their blood. They've not experienced the same degree of shame or of hostility from others.

In chapter 4, verse 15, he had written, The author of Hebrews does not think of temptation as all the little sins that might tempt us on the way.

Rather, he sees it as the more fundamental temptation of turning back or turning aside from the path that God has set before us. In this respect, Christ is our great example to follow.

[6 : 04] He has faced the full onslaught of the devil's temptation to turn back or to turn aside, and persevered through suffering and difficulty and tribulation the like of which we will never experience, in order to obtain the glory and the joy that was set before him by the Father.

He quotes from Proverbs chapter 3, verses 11 to 12, a passage about fatherly instruction. Christ learned obedience through what he suffered. Hebrews chapter 5, verses 7 to 8, In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death.

And he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. Christ's heavenly exaltation came through the path of earthly obedience.

As human beings, we grow in strength and character through suffering. Our mettle is tested and proved in such times. Christ is the son who directs our attention to the Father, and he's the model and pattern of our obedience.

He learned obedience through his suffering. And this is a model of sonship, and the model that we must follow ourselves. Sonship is learned through suffering. We could think of the example of Job, for instance.

[7 : 16] It is precisely on account of God's special regard for Job, his servant, that he is subject to the sort of suffering that he experiences. Suffering is a mark of legitimacy.

The suffering in view is not merely or even primarily punitive. It can be punitive on occasions, but much of the time, and primarily, it is for the purpose of growth through testing.

In Romans chapter 8, verses 13 to 19, we have a similar point. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, Abba, Father.

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. And if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him, in order that we may also be glorified with him.

[8 : 16] For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

God forms us in the character of sonship through suffering. Rather than drawing back from suffering then, suffering should be welcomed as a sign and proof of sonship, a sign of God's fatherly concern for our well-being and growth in character.

We submitted to earthly fathers. How much more to our heavenly Father? If we trusted our earthly fathers to develop character in us by following their instructions, how much more the instructions of God?

Discipline has a purpose, and its value is seen in its fruit, in the character that it produces in those who have been trained by it. Suffering is educative throughout scripture, so that people might mature through testing.

This consideration should spur us to redoubled efforts. What undermines people is not suffering, so much as meaningless suffering. When we truly grasp the end and purpose of our suffering, it ceases to undermine us, and actually can spur us to growth.

[9 : 21] We can think of the hand from which we are receiving suffering, the story of Job shows that it is not ultimately Satan who brings suffering to Job, but God. God has a purpose in the suffering that Job experiences.

He wants Job to grow through the experience of suffering, so that he might enter into a fuller experience of what it means to be a son of God. If we know and trust God as our heavenly Father, we will receive suffering from his hand, knowing that whatever purpose he has in it, it is a good one.

We have a birthright as sons and daughters of God, and we must not squander it. Peace and holiness are essential. Indeed, without holiness, no one will see the Lord. We are charged to undertake a collective pursuit here.

We are striving for peace and holiness together. It's one of the reasons why meeting together is so imperative. We must look out for each other, ensuring that no one falls short. And the author of Hebrews alludes to the covenant warning of Deuteronomy chapter 29, verses 14 to 20 here.

It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the Lord our God, and with whoever is not here with us today.

[10 : 32] You know how we lived in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed. And you have seen their detestable things, their idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold, which were among them.

Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself and his heart, saying, I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.

This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike. The Lord will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the Lord and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven.

Esau is put forward as a particular example of such a person who fell short and squandered his birthright and blessing. Esau is a negative example, in contrast to the positive examples of the preceding chapter.

The danger of such persons is that they will infect others, that their pattern of unbelief and unfaithfulness will be taken up by others. Esau is described as sexually immoral and unholy.

[11 : 51] There is debate in the commentators about whether that term should be translated as sexually immoral. However, it seems appropriate to the story of Esau. Esau was a man who squandered the great blessings that he had received.

He gave up the invaluable gift of the birthright of the covenant, of being the one who would carry on the legacy of Isaac for just a small meal. He devalued these things out of his sexual desire, marrying Canaanite women when he should have been faithful to the covenant.

His desires were entirely for this world and what is seen. He could not live in terms of the unseen, and his final end was tragic and as a result cautionary. He could not undo what he had done in selling the birthright and losing his blessing.

He had set his course by his behaviour. He may have mourned his loss, but he never seemed to truly repent of his sin. There is a real danger of apostasy, and the author of Hebrews is concerned to drive this home to his readers and hearers.

Do not throw away what you have received. Learn from the positive example of the people of faith, and learn also from the cautionary example of people like Esau.

[12 : 58] A question to consider. Much of the book of Hebrews is devoted to the consideration of examples of faith and unbelief.

How can we make more and better use of the examples of others in the path of faith, both positive and negative? How can we make more and better use of faith, both positive and negative?