

Jesus: Our Encouragement

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[0 : 00] Well, please do have a seat and let's pray as we come to read and study and learn from God's word together. Let's pray. Father God, we thank you so much that you love us in your son, the Lord Jesus.

Father, that you encourage every step of the way as we pursue him. Father, thank you that he walks with us by his spirit. So, Lord, now as we come to study this word, may you send your spirit to make it alive for us, to challenge and change.

Father, in order that we might see your son Jesus afresh anew this morning. Father, take feeble words, send your spirit that this sermon might come with power and deep conviction from yourself. Father, our greatest need right now is to hear your voice. So speak, your servants are listening. Amen. We are near the end of our series in Hebrews, out from the shadows.

We've got to chapter 12. It's stretched us. It's challenged us. It's shown us the Lord Jesus, maybe in ways that we've never seen before.

[1 : 19] Certainly against the backdrop of the Old Testament, it has been such a thrilling journey to go on. And we come to probably the most famous bit of Hebrews this morning in Hebrews 12.

And so my opening question for you is this. Who, put your hands up, has been running in the last six months? I don't mean you were late for the bus and you thought, if I don't get the 26, I'm going to be late for work.

I mean you wore shorts and you wore trainers and you thought, I'm going to go running. Put your hand up if you've been running in the last six months. It's very good.

It's a lot more athletic than I thought we were at Bruntsfield. Keep your hand up in the air if in the last year you've taken part in a running race. Who's been in a race?

Look at the Downies at the front in all their athletic glory. And Ailey, brilliant. What a sporty crew we are. But I wonder if you've ever experienced this.

[2 : 21] Maybe you haven't been running in the last six months, but I'm sure you've done some kind of cross-country, such as the brutality of the education system in this country. Have you ever felt this?

You're in the middle of a race when things start to fall apart. Your legs feel like concrete. Your breathing grows labored. Your strides turn into shuffles.

Negative thoughts flood your mind and the urge to quit becomes overwhelming. Unfortunately, if you run long enough, this will inevitably be your experience.

And unless you can push through, your race will be over. That is one of the most famous Kenyan athletes who's been running marathons for years.

It's him describing the experience of hitting the wall. Of hitting the wall. It happened to Paula Radcliffe in 2004 at the Athens Olympics.

[3 : 20] She'd been running. She'd actually got to 21.6 miles, which is some effort. But at that point, she hit the wall she couldn't overcome and tapped out and just sat sobbing by the side of the road.

What we have here in Hebrews 12 being described is this group of Jewish Christians. And in their Christian life, in their journey towards the Lord Jesus, they have, in every sense of the word, hit the wall.

They've hit the wall in their race of faith. And I think three things have happened to them. And if you look down at Hebrews 12 and verse 12, I'll just point them out to you.

The first thing they've witnessed is they're prematurely exhausted. Look what he says in verse 12. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.

Make level paths for your feet so that the lame may not be disabled but rather healed. They've come through a lot, these Hebrew believers.

[4 : 29] They've suffered hardship. They've struggled. There's been difficulty. They've had possessions confiscated. Their reputations in society have been crushed.

They've really, in the crosshairs of a hostile society. And they're exhausted. And they're ready just to tap out.

And like Paula Radcliffe, to just sit sobbing on the side of what was their Christian race. Then look at verse 14. And we see their second experience as they hit the wall.

They've got stubborn deafness. Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and be holy. Without holiness, no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God. And that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. The phrase bitter root here isn't some kind of divided relationship or some kind of friction experienced within the church.

[5 : 31] But as a reference back to Deuteronomy 29. Where Moses says, 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 in his heart.

Saying, I shall be safe though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart. What the writer to the Hebrews is saying is make sure you keep listening to God.

That you don't just close your ears. That you don't rely on the distance that you've traveled so far and go, well I've got it. I don't need to listen to God anymore.

The Christian faith is not so much about the resume we've accrued. But it is about listening to the Lord today. They've stopped listening.

[6 : 32] They've got stubborn deafness. So just imagine Mo Farah. That greatest of British imports that we've ever managed.

Who did so well at the London Olympics. And this summer we'll be competing in Rio. But just imagine if he said, oh, London was great.

I don't need to train for Rio. I can just sit on my couch and use Deliveroo till my heart's content eating burgers and Chinese and Thai.

I can just eat as much as I want. Because I did it before. I don't really need to train for Rio in the summer. I can't be bothered. He said, I've did enough before.

I can just do whatever I want. Now that's the experience that the Hebrew Christians feel that they've gone far enough. And then the third experience as they hit this wall in the race of faith.

[7 : 33] Look at verse 16. See that no one is immoral or is godless like Esau. Who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the older son. Afterwards, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected.

Even though he sought the blessing with tears. He could not change what he had done. This reference to Esau is very stark. We maybe remember the story from back in Genesis.

That Esau comes in from hunting. It's not been very successful and he's absolutely famished. And his brother Jacob, who's never slow in taking an opportunity that presents itself, says, oh Esau, have some of my stew.

But in return, I want your blessing. And Esau, so distracted by the immediate, loses perspective on the eternal. And he says, deal.

And it makes a massive difference that Esau pursues comfort now. And the fleeting pleasures of sin and compromise. And at the same time, in that instant, forsakes the eternal blessing that is his in, through God's.

[8 : 47] And that's what's happening to these Hebrew Christians. They've hit the wall. They're suffering premature exhaustion. They're closing their ears to what God is saying.

And they're distracted by all sorts of things in the world and sin. But I guess this is where God's word is so fresh and real to us.

Because the experience of these Hebrews is so readily our experience. I mean, who amongst us, the longer we've been in this race, haven't just wanted to sit by the side of the road, tap out, exhausted, overwhelmed.

It's all too much. Who amongst us, hasn't been tempted to rely on the distance traveled rather than being obedient to the Lord today?

Who hasn't been tempted to go, well, I've done enough. And now I'll just go to the hammock and put my slippers on and watch National Geographic rather than pursuing God with all that he

promises and tells us each day.

[9 : 56] And who amongst us doesn't know the very real temptation to be sidetracked and diverted, to stop pursuing Jesus but start pursuing other things?

To exchange an eternal dividend that is ours in Christ for the fleeting pleasures of sin and satisfaction now.

And so what the writer to the Hebrews is saying is that the Christian life is an ultra-endurance marathon. This starts when you meet Jesus and trust in him.

It continues all of your early life as you pursue Jesus. All of your earthly life as you pursue Jesus. And it ends gloriously when we meet Jesus and receive the unimaginable reward that is ours because of him.

And so what would God say? What would God say to encourage these people and us when we're tempted to, like Paul, to sit by the side of the road and cry rather than keep on going?

[11 : 07] How is God going to encourage us when we're tempted to tap out and give up? Well, he encourages us in two very surprising ways.

Verses 1 to 3, he encourages us in the arena. And verses 4 to 11, he trains us in the gymnasium. He encourages us in the arena.

Verses 1 to 3. And he trains us in the gymnasium. Verses 4 to 11. So let's look at this. Hebrews 12, verse 1.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

[12 : 18] I think he gives us five things that we're to do if we're not going to be those that tap out and give up. And the first one is this. He says, learn from.

We've just come through Hebrews chapter 11, which has been this, this marvelous list with small biographical details of these great saints of old who kept on pursuing Jesus in faith.

He says, these people are to encourage us and we're to learn from them. These are not so much supporters in the stadium clapping us along, but it is more the honors board.

The honors board listing their achievements of the past so that as we go out to run our race, we go, well, they did it and they did it and they suffered more than me.

So it encourages us to keep on going. We're running a race. And the writer to the Hebrews says, many people have run this race before you and learn from them.

[13 : 24] Learn from what they did and how they persevered and how they kept going, even through struggles that are greater than what you are facing. Here are some of the names.

And then the second thing he says is strip off. Back when Hebrews was written, there wasn't lycra or high performance fabric or neoprene. When you took part in the games, you took part in the way that nature intended.

You would do it in a very vulnerable way. And it's this analogy that the writer to the Hebrews builds on next. He says, shed everything that isn't absolutely essential.

Get rid. Make sure that there is nothing holding you back. Make sure wind resistance is to an absolute zero. So this is Sir Bradley Wiggins, another great British treasure.

Hebrews 12 is illustration central. And so Bradley Wiggins in 2009, he was a middle distance track athlete. And in 2009, he switched to the road.

[14 : 41] And his first major race was the Tour de France. And Bradley Wiggins, who, let's face it, wasn't exactly obese to start with, in order to get ready for the Tour de France, shed 16 kilograms.

In order to give himself every chance of completing the three-week endurance race up and down mountains. He turned up at the start line with 0% body fat.

He was giving himself every chance. The papers changed his nickname from Wiggo to Twiggo. Because so skeletal had Wiggins become.

It's the same thing that the writer to the Hebrews is saying. Strip off. Throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. My friend Paul has just started working for Mission Aviation Fellowship.

And his job is when the planes come in as they're donated from different organizations, is to just strip out everything. The fabric in the seats. Any instruments on the dashboard that aren't utterly necessary.

[15:47] He takes every other step out from the landing steps. Why? Because they're shedding every single bit of weight. To give them every chance of stopping on these less than salubrious runways.

And making sure they can fit as much in as they possibly can. It's that same idea that the writers of the Hebrews is telling his people. Strip off everything that's not absolutely necessary.

Notice that he says two things. He says, let us throw off everything that hinders. This can even be good things. Permissible things. These aren't necessarily sinful things.

But these are good things that have become ultimate things. When family is so pedestaled that you can't do anything else. When your job envelops all of your energy and takes all of your time.

When your house and your possessions. When your sports team and your friends. When they start to dominate. And Jesus has to start to diminish. That's the kind of thing that Mr. Hebrews is saying.

[16:50] Let us throw. Throw it off. Even good things need to find their priority. Need to find their place behind our pursuit of the Lord Jesus.

And then he says, also throw off the sin that so easily entangles. And so many of us are running this race dressed like this.

With a huge comfortable scarf. With inappropriate shoes. With a mink coat on. Things that are so comfortable to wear that we've got so used to wearing.

And yet we're just tripping ourselves up. We've got this sin that we've become so used to. And it's completely destroying our efforts to pursue Jesus.

Unless we shed everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. We're in every danger of getting the did not finish qualification.

[17:49] Because we're laboring and carrying too much stuff. Then he says, dig deep. Thirdly. Let us run the race with perseverance.

To just keep on going. It's not a sprint. It's an ultra endurance marathon. The Christian life is long. Largely uphill. Energy sapping.

Tough. And immensely costly. You read the Gospels and seemingly every time Jesus speaks to people. He says, this is tough.

Don't sign up for the race unless you're committed. And just see how difficult it is going to be. Any prospective disciple is told it's going to cost.

Jesus' offer of forgiveness is absolutely free. It is all by grace. Not by works. But being a disciple is all or nothing.

[18:53] He makes us fully aware of the implications before he accepts our applications. Unless we're ready for the race marked out for us. We're sure. As we know it's tough.

We'll give up. And we'll do a pull and Radcliffe and sit by the side crying. It's not a sprint. And it's not a saunter. Keep on running.

Dig deep. And then he says, look. Look to Jesus. Fixing our eyes on Jesus. The one who is our ultimate encouragement.

The one who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Borrowing language from chapter 2, verse 10. I was trying to think of an illustration for this.

And I went to the Glasgow Commonwealth Games. And the team triathlon relay. And the beautiful thing about England is that we have two triathletes. The Brownlee brothers.

[19:49] And they are just better than everyone else. So when it came to the team triathlon. The two of them had run such a brilliant time. That all the two ladies in the middle had to do was finish.

They just had to cross the line and the gold. Another gold would go to England. That's kind of what we have in view here. That Jesus has run this race so well.

So fast. So perfectly. So obediently. So wonderfully. That all we need to do is cross the line. We just need to keep on going. And the most glorious reward will be ours.

That makes Olympic gold look like worthless trash. Just need to keep on running to finish. Fixing our eyes on Jesus.

The wonderful champion. Who's ensured victory for our team. And welcomes us onto the podium. If we'll just finish. And not give up.

[20 : 52] Lastly from here it says. Not only look to him. But consider him. Verse 3. Mr. Hebrews also exhorts us. To not just look to.

But to learn from Jesus. To consider him. To consider him as the ultimate one. Who endured so much for our sake.

Who suffered opposition. And suffering. And shame. And mockery. And brutality. And injustice. Who was faced with relentless traps. That he escaped. Who was faced with manifold temptations. That he never gave into. That he willfully submitted. And obeyed his father. The bare face lies. The wanton rejection. The perpetual disappointment. The voluntary surrender.

The obedient sacrifice. The setting his face like flint. To complete the course for which he came. And the writer to the Hebrews says. Consider him. Consider what he went through for you.

[21 : 50] Consider all. That lay in his way. And yet he overcame. And suddenly you'll find. Strengthen your stride. And hope. That you'll finish.

Consider him. Who threw it all. Despite it all. Laying down his all. He finished for us. No one suffered more. No one endured more. No one accomplished more than Jesus.

And so consider him. As you run your race. In pursuit of him. In the arena of faith. When we're tempted to sit down.

By the side of the road. Having hit the wall. God cheers us on in the arena. Through the first three verses of Hebrews. And he says five things. Learn from the saints of old.

Strip off everything that hinders. And the sin that so easily entangles. Dig deep. The race is long. And it is hard. Look to Jesus.

[22 : 50] Who's completed the race. Perfectly for us. And consider him. What he overcame. So that you too. Can overcome. And so that's the.

Encouragement in the arena. But verses four to eleven. Talk about the training. In the gymnasium. Talk about the training.

In the gymnasium. In God's. Preparation program. Nelson Mandela said this. Running taught me valuable lessons. In cross country competition.

Training counted more than intrinsic ability. And I could compensate for a lack of natural aptitude. With diligence and discipline. I applied this in. Everything.

So look at verse eleven. Verse eleven. See the very end. That word. Trained by it. That word trained. Is the Greek word. From where we get our word.

[23 : 48] Gymnasium. And that is what. What God is doing. As we run this race. He is. Training us. He is. Disciplining us. He is. Putting things in our way.

In the training regime. Of our life. In order that we might become. Holy. He says to us. In verse fourteen. That without holiness.

No one will see the Lord. That God's. Disciplined. Training regime. Using anything. And everything. In your life. Using your situations. And circumstances. In order that you might put on holiness.

In order that you might be. Being sanctified. And growing. In order that you might be. More suitable for the race. In which you're engaged. The Hebrew.

Hebrew Christians. Are bemused. Why is it so hard? Why do I want to give up? Is God letting me down? And the writer to the Hebrew says. No, no, no.

[24 : 47] He's just training you. He's just working all things together. To conform you. To the image of the Lord Jesus. God this morning. Is much more interested. In your holiness.

Than he is about your happiness. Because your happiness. Will be fleeting. But your holiness. Will last. And be joyful. Forever. Forever. And so what we see.

In this passage. Are the ways. That our training. Is working. The first thing he says. Is in verse four. In your struggle against sin.

You have not yet resisted. To the point. Of shedding your blood. Seems like quite a brutal point. Doesn't it? That when we're tempted. To give up. God says. Well you shouldn't give up. You're still alive.

You won't find that. In many pastoral counseling. Manuals. That when people. Are really struggling. You go. But you're still alive. What are you complaining about? But that's what.

[25 : 43] The writer to the Hebrews. Is saying. Compared to some of the people. At the end of chapter 11. Your heart's still beating. And your lungs. Are still inflating. Keep going. You're still alive.

Knowing that. Should encourage. To keep us going. That we're still alive. In order that we might. Keep going. Verse five. He says. You're being trained. Have you completely forgotten.

This word of encouragement. That addresses you. As a father addresses his son. It says. My son. Do not make light. Of the Lord's discipline. And do not lose heart. When he rebukes you. So when difficult times come. We need to keep walking. The tight rope. We can't make light of it. And just laugh it off. And pretend that nothing's happening. And we've got nothing to learn. In the situation. But nor are we. To be completely crushed. By it. And give up. Don't make light of it. Don't lose heart.

[26 : 38] Because of it. But grow. In the midst of it. God is aligning circumstances. And situations. In your life. In order that you might learn. And grow.

In order that you might. Put on holiness. And have greater stamina. For the race. That is marked out before you. You're still alive.

You're being trained. And thirdly. You're legitimate children. I was in Sainsbury's yesterday. Sainsbury's on Saturday. Is excruciating. And it was made all the worse. By a two year old little girl. Who in the veg aisle. Is having a proper tantrum. She is kicking the floor. She's face down. She's punching and screaming. Her parents. Her head is revolving. 360 degrees. 360 degrees. But no part of me thought. Oh I should go over. And say to this little girl. That's not the appropriate way. To act in public. I don't know if you would do that.

[27 : 33] I certainly wouldn't. Why? Because it's the parents job. To discipline their children. Isn't it? And that's the great encouragement. That comes to us in verse 7. That God is disciplining us.

Because he loves us. and is treating us like children. That he's doing whatever he can in order to make us fit for the race you're legitimate children. So counterintuitively, when we face hardship, the discipline of the Lord, he's doing it because he loves us and wants the best for us and wants to use any means possible in order that holiness might be the end result.

Oh, that's the picture. That wasn't that child, just in case you thought that was a bit weird. Verse 9, you're learning respect. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for us.

Now, generally speaking, and I know some people here had very difficult and abusive relationships with parents, but broadly speaking, parents who discipline their children earn their respects. When we'd done something wrong and my dad came in from work, like we hid in our bedrooms. Because we were afraid of him because we respected him. And it wasn't so much when he shouted to us, it was when he adopted that very disappointed in you, Jonathan Whisper.

[28 : 58] And you were totally crushed because you really respected your parents your parents because they loved you and wanted the best for you. And so God is disciplining us.

He's giving us this training regime in order that we might grow in holiness and respect him and have a right fear of the Lord. In order that we might keep on going.

I think we get this when really difficult things happen. When we know that we can't get through it ourselves, we throw ourselves on the Lord and pray to him. But I wonder how many opportunities to learn and to grow and deepen our relationship with God we lose.

Because when things aren't quite at that extreme, we just try and tough it out and go it alone. Two more little encouragements.

Verse 10, your training will work. They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best, but God disciplines us for our good in order that we may share in his holiness.

[30 : 02] In contrast to earthly fathers who discipline us to the best of their ability in order to bring about what they hope will be good results.

Our father God disciplines us in order to achieve the desired outcome of our holiness. He's not making it up as he goes along. He's not reading the latest parenting manual or sporadically using the naughty step.

God is orchestrating and training even through hardship in order to cultivate holiness in our lives. In order that we might be those that throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

He is so all over this training program that that might happen in your life and mine. And the final encouragement, verse 11. No discipline seems pleasant at the time.

I don't know if you ever got a smacked bottom when you were growing up, but it wasn't pleasant. But you learnt from it. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful later on, however.

[31 : 06] It produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have trained, been trained by it. If we remain enlisted in God's gymnasium, continuing to face hardship as part and

parcel of God's training regime of discipleship, then it will be tough.

It will be painful. It will be unpleasant. Like a sculpture God is working on that he's chipping away and stripping away everything in order that we might be conformed to the glorious image of the Lord Jesus.

In time, this training regime will work. So when we face discipline, we're so ready to ask, why me? Why is this happening? God, why are you treating me like this when what we should be asking is what?

What are you teaching me in the midst of this hardship? And the second question, how can I get through it in a way that brings you maximum glory and me, maximum growth in holiness?

That we might develop a muscle memory in living rightly and peaceably before a holy God in order that, as verse 14 says, we might have the hope of seeing him.

[32 : 24] Muhammad Ali famously said this, I hated every minute of training, but I said, don't quit, suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion.

If that was what he said about his relatively short boxing career and the prospect of wearing an oversized belt for a few years, how much more should it be our attitude not to quit amidst God's perfect training regime in this life to make us holy with the sure and certain prospect of sharing eternal glory with God forever.

So what do we do when we hit the wall of our Christian life? Well, we're encouraged in the arena. Learn from the saints of old, strip off everything that hinders, dig deep and run with perseverance. Look to Jesus, who's already completed the race for us and consider how he did it. And learn everything you can in God's gymnasium. You're still alive.

Keep going. You're being trained. That's a good thing. God's treating you as sons because you're legitimate children. You're learning respect and a healthy fear of God with a view to please him in every way.

[33 : 37] Your training will work. Your training will deliver and you'll have the hope of seeing God forever. And so we come into land with this African proverb.

Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the cheetah or it will not survive. Every morning, a cheetah wakes up and it knows it must run faster than the slowest gazelle or it will not survive.

It doesn't matter if you are the cheetah or the gazelle. When the sun comes up, you better be running. Dear friends, when the sun comes up, run towards Jesus and keep on running the rest of the day.

Tomorrow, simply repeat and the same the day after. Keep on repeating until you finally cross the line and collapse exhausted from the race into the eternal presence of Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith.

It may hurt now. It may cost now. We may struggle now. We may know hardship now. But if we run with perseverance, the race marked out before us, it will be worth it then.

[34 : 47] And it will be worth it in the light of the glorious eternity. We'll get to share with God because of the Lord Jesus. Let's pray. Father God, thank you so much that you don't leave us alone but you treat us as children.

And so, Lord, I pray that you would encourage every stride. Father, I pray that you would continue to cultivate holiness in our lives.

And Father, you would do it all in order that we might be conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus and that we might know the sure and certain hope of at the end running into his gracious arms.

And so, Lord, help us, train us. We invite you to do whatever is necessary in order that we might be fit for this race. Father, encourage those who are struggling.

Father, open the ears of those that have stopped listening. And Father, may there be undivided hearts in the lives of those that attempted to look elsewhere for joy and pleasure and happiness.

[36 : 09] Father, thank you so much for Jesus who endured so much so that we would not grow weary or lose heart. Father, thank you so much for him. Amen.

and thank you. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.