

Hebrews 12:12-24

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[0 : 00] Well, it's so good to be back up here again. It's not easy talking into a phone in an empty room and trying to be natural.

So even though we're not back to normal, it's still great. So on Thursday, many of us listened as Nicola Sturgeon gave her regular update on the current position with the coronavirus.

There were a couple of lines that stood out to me. She said, I am aware that the announcements I have made so far are hard for people to hear.

After six long, hard months, we are still asking the public to make a lot of difficult sacrifices. I know that making these choices gets harder and much more tiresome.

As time passes. Here she's expressing her frustration and the frustration of the nation at how long all of this is lasting.

[1 : 12] How long we are having to endure these challenges and these restrictions. Things that were easy to do for the first few weeks become more and more tiresome.

Patience and endurance are required. And I think that's very much the idea that we've been looking at over the last few weeks in Hebrews.

There's been a repeated call to keep going. To hold on in there. And repeated reminders of why it is all worthwhile.

Tonight, I want to start with a bit of a refresher of the three big pictures that we've looked at in the last couple of chapters. Then in the first few verses of our passage, we'll see three ways that we should live in light of this.

And then at the end of the passage, we'll see three ways of reacting towards God. So three pictures. Three ways to live. Three reactions to God.

[2 : 23] Nine points to get through in half an hour. So we'd better get in there. I think it's important for us to set tonight's passage in the context.

If we're to not misunderstand some of the things that are said, we need to see the links with what has gone before. Back in chapter 11 and into the beginning of chapter 12, we saw the picture of a great cloud of witnesses.

Of the people who have gone before us. The people who can testify to God's faithfulness. And a repeated feature throughout this chapter is how they refused to accept the best that this world could offer to them.

Because they had a far greater hope. They were willing to endure rejection, ridicule, and even death. Because they knew that God was faithful to his promises.

And then at the beginning of chapter 12, we saw this image of a race. We were encouraged to get rid of the things that were holding us back.

[3 : 37] We were encouraged to run with endurance. To keep running despite how long and hard the race is. And we were encouraged to fix our eyes on Jesus.

Who had run the race before us as our example. But also had opened up the way for us. And ultimately is the goal of the race.

And then last week, we continued in chapter 12 with the picture of a loving father disciplining his son.

We were reminded that we do not suffer because God does not love us and does not care for us. But rather we suffer because he loves us so much that he is unwilling to leave us as we are.

But is working in us to transform us. To make us who we are meant to be. We were encouraged to endure. Because suffering does not last forever.

[4 : 42] And God is working for our good. All of these pictures are about motivating us for the long haul. Motivating us so that we will endure trials and difficulties.

So that we will keep going because we have such a great hope. As we were reminded this morning. The key to living faithfully in the present.

Is thinking clearly about the future. So as we turn to our passage. To verse 12. We see the first of the three ways of how we should live.

We're told therefore. Because of. In light of these things that you have just heard about. In light of these big pictures. Strengthen your feeble arms.

And weak knees. This might be seen as insensitive. Just try harder. Just do better. If it wasn't for the context.

[5 : 53] Because we're told to do all of this. In light. Of the encouragement to endure. We're told to do it in light of being reminded. That the hardship that we're going through.

Is for our benefit. And so we're told. Don't give up. Gather what little strength you have together. And push on. Another step.

And then another. As Ian White used to sing. You've got to keep on. Keep on. Keep on. Keeping on. And that's why we were reminded back in chapter 10.

To spur one another on. One of our directors at work. A Christian who goes to Curbbers. Shared something with me during the week. He's been working with a business coach.

For better or worse. Who was encouraging him to start the day. With self-affirmation statements. And so he shared with me the list that he has pulled together.

[6 : 56] Based off Ephesians 1. God is my father. I was chosen to be his before God said let there be light. I am holy and blameless in his sight.

God's blessings are a result of his love for me. And so on. I think he had 16 points in total. Not quite sure that that's what the coach was thinking of.

But if we intend to stand. If we intend to run. We must remind ourselves. And each other. Again and again. Of these truths.

But secondly. We're called in verse 13. To make level paths. For our feet. This seems to be a quote from.

Proverbs 4. 26. Which gets translated in quite a wide variety of ways. But commonly something along the lines of. Give careful thought.

[7 : 57] Or ponder. The path of your feet. We're being called here to think about our path. To think about our choices. The way that we choose to live.

And to choose to walk. A careful path. It would be foolish for us to choose to walk. On a precarious. I say path.

On the edge of a precipice. Or foolish for us to. Wander through. A dark alley. In the middle of the night. Alone.

But I think what's very significant. Is the second half of the verse. Where we're given. The reason why. So that the lame.

- May not be disabled. But rather healed. These are slightly confusing words. But I think.
- [8 : 55] This is basically saying. Because you're weak. And broken. And hurting. We must recognize. That while still in this life.
- We are. We are. We are. We are weak. It would not be sensible for us. To attempt a marathon. With our leg in plaster. Or to climb a Monroe.
- With blistered feet. But what does this mean for us in practice? I don't know. Maybe it means.
- That we're careful to choose. To live where there is a good church nearby. Maybe it means that we're careful. Not to accept a promotion. That will consume all.
- Our time and energy. Maybe it means. Being careful. How we spend our leisure time. And who we spend it with. Being careful. About what books.
- [9 : 54] Films. Or other media. We choose to fill our minds with. But. We have to be careful. About this.
- Yes. We are called to be careful. About the choices we make. To recognize our weakness. And to flee temptation. Rather than flirt with it. Rather than flirt with it. But.
- The easy answer. Is to shut ourselves off. From everything. In the world around us. And all the challenges that that brings.
- To live lives of splendid monastic isolation. To be careful. To be careful. At many times in the history of the church. That has. Been seen. As the right thing to do.
- I remember once. Several years ago. Through in room three. Paul Johnson. Leading a discussion. On the subject of. The Christian. And entertainment. Environment. And he said.
- [10 : 56] That for him. Growing up. It was simple. The answer was no. And for many. That. Was the simple answer. The cinema.
- The pub. The stadium. Were all off limits. The TV. Was not allowed in house. And the only reading material. Was the Bible. Christian commentaries.
- And biographies. And there is. Most definitely. A certain wisdom. In that path. And for some of you. That may be the path.
- That you choose to follow. Because many of these things. Are seductive. They can lead us astray. In our thoughts. And ultimately.
- In our actions. But yet. Jesus prays in the upper room. Saying. My prayer is not. That you take them out. Of the world. But that you protect them.
- [11 : 54] From the evil one. He calls us to not. Hide our light. Under our bowl. When we recently. Studied Paul's ministry. In the book of Acts.
- One thing. That was really clear. To me. Was how much. He knew. And understood. The cultures. He was speaking to. He quoted. Their poets.
- He responded. To their philosophers. I certainly. I certainly. Know. That the closest. I ever get. To deep. Meaningful. Conversations.
- With my work colleagues. Is in the pub. In that environment. They are relaxed. And willing. To talk. In a way. That they wouldn't.
- At any other time. But for some. Depending on their particular. Areas of weakness. That would not. Be a wise path.
- [12 : 48] To take. Which is why. We have to be careful. Here. Not to try. And put rules. Where scripture. Is silent. But we must tread. Carefully.
- And not be foolhardy. And then thirdly. In verse 14. We are told. To make.

Every effort. To live in peace. With everyone. And to be holy. Without holiness. No one. Will see the Lord. Once again.

This seems like. An impossible. Demand. We are being told. To strive. For something. That we know. We cannot achieve. With the added threat. That if we do not achieve.

The impossible. We will not see God. God. If this is all there is. Then Christianity. Is a sick joke. But again.

[13 : 45] We need to look back. At what has gone before. In verses 10 and 11. We read. God disciplines us. For our good. In order that we may.

Share in his holiness. No discipline. Seems pleasant. At the time. But painful. Later on. However. It produces. A harvest. Of righteousness.

And peace. For those. Who have been trained. By it. Do you see the link? What were the things. That God. Was working in us.

To achieve. Holiness. Righteousness. And peace. And what are the things. We are told. To make every effort. Towards. Peace. And holiness.

We are not being asked. To do anything. In our own strength. We are being called. Yes. To radical transformation. In our lives.

[14 : 41] And how we relate. To one another. To seek peace. And how we relate. To God. To seek holiness. But we are not being asked.

To do it. In our own strength. We are being asked. To do it. In the strength. That God will give us. As he works in. And through us. And so.

As we come to the second half. Of our passage. We see. Three different reactions. That people have. Towards God. Firstly.

In verses. 18. To 21. We see a reaction. Of terror. The picture. We are shown here. Is a Mount Sinai.

The Israelites. Have left Egypt. And have camped. In the desert. At the base of Sinai. And when they are there. God comes down. On the mountain. To give them the law.

[15 : 42] And as he reveals. His presence. On the mountain. With clouds. And thunder. And fire. And trumpets. The people see. The power. And majesty.

And holiness. Of God. And they are. Terrified. They beg. For God. Not to speak. Directly to them. But only to speak.

Through Moses. And ever since. The fall. That has been. The natural reaction. To seeing. In the presence. Of God.

In the garden. Adam and Eve. Head. From God. Isaiah. Isaiah cried out. Woe is me. I am a man. Of unclean lips.

And Peter said. Go away from me Lord. For I. Am a sinful man. It's a natural. Reaction. To an almighty. Magnificent.

[16 : 38] Perfect. Holy God. When you know. That you. Are a sinner. It's a reaction. Which makes you. Look down. On your. Bedometer.

When you see. A police car. Behind you. When you immediately. See everything. That is sloppy. About your driving. That you have been. Perfectly happy with. The moment before. But this reaction.

To God. Is one. That leads. To legalism. To the sort of. Religion. That is about. Trying to work. To make yourself. Acceptable to God. To doing.

Hard penance. To show. Your contrition. To striving. To do good. In the hope. That it will be. Just enough. For God.

To allow you. Into heaven. And I think. That's the major view. That people outside. Have of God. They think.

[17 : 35] That we believe. In an angry. And vengeful God. And that Christianity. Is about trying to. Live a good enough life. To somehow. Appease him.

But we're told. In verses 22. To 24. Of a different way. Of how we.

Have come to God. We have not come. In terror. But instead. In awe. Instead of Sinai. The mountain.

Pictured here. Is Zion. The new Jerusalem. Our promised. Now. And not yet. Home. This also.

Is a mountain. Where God's glory. Is displayed. In splendor. Instead of fear. It's a place of joy. It's a place of worship.

[18 : 29] And celebration. It's a place where the church. Is gathered together. Along with countless angels. When we read of this city. In Revelation.

It is beautiful. It is glorious. The best the author can do. Is to use pictures of gold. Clear like crystal. Of precious stones.

Perils. Rainbows. Rivers. Perfect proportions. Massive dimensions. Because an accurate description. Goes beyond.

What our language. Or our minds. Could possibly. Comprehend. But that's not really. What's amazing about it. What's amazing.

Is that here. The dwelling of God. Is with his people. Gone. Is all death. Mourning. Crying. And pain. Sin will be no more.

[19 : 25] And neither will the effects. And consequences. Of it. We will be with him. And we will be like him. For we will see him.

As he is. And his job says. How our hearts. Yearn. Within us. So many people. Would look at this.

And say. Ah yes. Yes. This is the God. Of the New Testament. A loving. Friendly God. Completely different. From that nasty.

Judgmental God. Of the Old Testament. We want. Nothing to do with him. But that's not the case. This is the exact same God. With the exact same character.

Because we're told. In verse 23. That we have come to God. The judge. Of all. So what's the difference? Why the different response?

[20 : 23] That's what verse 24. Tells us. And in fact. All the previous. Eleven chapters. Of Hebrews. You have come. To Jesus. The mediator. Of a new covenant.

We have come. To the same God. But we have not come. Trying to impress him. With our own. Attempts. At righteousness. We have come.

To the sprinkled blood. That speaks. A better word. Than the blood. Of Abel. Back in Genesis. Chapter 4.

Cain. Killed his brother. Abel. And God says to him. Listen. Your brother's blood. Cries out to me. From the ground. What does Abel's blood.

Cry out? Surely cries out for vengeance. For justice. It's the cry of the innocent. Who have been wronged. And this is not a wrong thing.

[21 : 24] To long for. If there is no justice. If evil goes unpunished forever. If there is no reckoning. If there is no reckoning.

For all the atrocities carried out. And all the little hurts. And lies. And gossip. And betrayal. Then this world.

Is a very unfair place to live. And the God who rules it. Cannot claim to be good. Justice must be done.

But we know. That if justice is done. We are in trouble. So if that cry for justice.

Is so strong. What better word. Does the blood of Jesus have. Finished. Paid for.

[22 : 21] Mine. No condemnation. That is why. We can approach. This holy God. With joy. But we must not think.

That this in any way. Makes him a less. Awesome God. He is still. The God. Before whom. The living creatures. Cry out. Holy. Holy. Holy.

All day long. He is still. The same God. But we have been washed. We have been sanctified. We have been justified.

We have been adopted. And so we can come. Before him. With joy. But there is a third way.

That we might react to God. Not in terror. Not in awe. But in indifference. If you turn back up to.

[23 : 21] Verse 16. We read. See to it. That no one is sexually immoral. Or is godless like Esau. Who for a single meal.

Sold his inheritance rights. As the oldest son. There is an amazing contrast. That can be drawn. Between this verse. And verse 2.

I didn't notice this. Until I read it in an article. But as soon as you see it. The parallels. The parallels and the contrast. Are so striking. Back in verse 2.

We read of Jesus. Who for the joy set before him. Endured the cross. In verse 16. We read of Esau. Who for a single meal.

Sold his inheritance. Jesus. Who for the joy set before him. Endured the cross. Esau. Esau. Who for a single meal.

[24 : 21] Sold his inheritance. Each person is identified. With a motivation. And an action. Jesus is looking ahead.

Beyond the agony and torment of the cross. To the joy. Not just. Of being back at his father's side. In the glories of heaven. Because that was his from the beginning.

But for the joy of presenting to his father. A redeemed people. To present us. Without fault. And with great joy. As one old hymn puts it.

He and I. In that bright glory. One deep joy shall share. Mine. To be forever with him.

His. That I. Am there. With that glorious vision before him. He endures. The excruciating pain of the cross.

[25 : 22] He endures the horror of my sin. And of yours. He endures the agony. Of separation from his father. Because the motivation was so glorious.

And so compelling. And so the difference with Esau's story. Is shocking. He'd been out in the open country.

Probably hunting. He comes back starving and exhausted. And he wanted a bowl. Of Jacob's stew. So much. That he was willing to sell his inheritance.

As the first born son. He probably stood to inherit a double portion. Of all of his father's wealth. But he stood to inherit far more than just goods.

Because Esau was not just the son. Of any random nomadic herdsman. Growing up in Bronze Age Canaan. His father was Isaac.

[26 : 23] His grandfather was Abraham. And if you remember back. God had made covenants. With Abraham and Isaac. God had promised. To make them into a great nation.

To give them descendants. That could not be counted. He promised to give them a wonderful land. To live in. And more than all of those. He had promised that he would bless them.

And bless all nations through them. Ultimately. Although they could not have imagined it at the time. These promises would lead.

To the birth of Jesus. But as we read a couple of weeks ago. Looking forward to these promises. Was what shaped. And defined the lives of Abraham and Isaac.

These were not promises given. To someone in the distant past. Abraham would still have been around. When Esau was growing up. He must have heard about these promises.

[27 : 26] Countless times. He would have been told. Esau my son. One day. You will be the head of this family.

It will be through you. And your children. That God will do all these things. I don't know whether he had placed any value.

On these things before. But at that moment. He could only see. He could only see as far. As his present needs. And desires. He was so desperate.

For that bowl of stew. But in comparison. With his immediate hunger. Which will be gone in a few minutes. He considered.

The promises of God. To be inconsequential. And so. He sold his inheritance. For a single meal. So why.

[28 : 26] Is sexual immorality brought up here? What has it got to do with Esau? It's not something. He's particularly. Renowned for. Why is it being singled out.

From all other sins? I think. The link is. That like with Esau. Sexual sin.

Is all about. What we would be willing. To sacrifice. For just a few minutes. Of pleasure. However ecstatic. Those minutes might be. Like Esau.

Is about. Looking only. As far. As the felt needs. Of the moment. However overwhelming. Those needs. And desires. Might be. Failure.

In this area. Has been. Has been. The downfall. Of so many. Prominent figures. When they've failed. To keep even. To the minimal. Standards. Of restraint. That the society.

[29 : 24] Around us. Would expect. All too often. Has been. The downfall. Of prominent figures. Within the church. Has been.

The case. The cause. Of so many. Broken relationships. And so many. Have put it. Before. God. And it's. An area. Where.

Probably. Most of us. Struggle. And many of us. Fall. Whether. With our minds. Our eyes. Or our bodies. Things. But it's not.

Just. Just. Sex. That is. Just. An illustration. A representative. Example. Elsewhere. Paul. Talks about. Those. Whose God.

Is their stomach. And those. Who are. Lovers. Of pleasure. Rather. Than. Lovers. Of God. Ultimately. It's all. About the. Contrast. With the people.

[30 : 19] That we read. About. Back in. Chapter 11. People. Who were. Willing. To give up. Fleeting. Pleasures. For long-term. Eternal. Hope.

People. Who had been. Captured. By a vision. So grand. And compelling. That they would. Give up. Everything. For it. As C.S. Lewis. Wrote.

We are. Like an. Ignorant. Child. Who wants. To go on. Making. Mud pies. In a slum. Because he. Cannot. Imagine. What is. Meant. By the.

Offer. Of a holiday. At the sea. We are. Far. Too easily. Pleased. And we are. Far. Too easily. Pleased. We continually.

Put our. Immediate. Comfort. And pleasure. Above. Infinitely. Greater. Future. Glory. We fail. Again. And again.

[31 : 16] But there is. Hope. As we have. Seen. Before. We come. To this. Holy God. Through the. Sprinkled. Blood.

Of Christ. As James. Would write. If we. Confess. Our sins. He is. Faithful. And just. And will. Forgive us.

Our sins. And purify us. From all. Unrighteousness. As one modern song. Puts it. Which we will listen to later. What patience.

Would wait. As we constantly roam. What father. So tender. Is calling us home. He welcomes. The weakest. The vilest. The poor.

Our sins. They are many. His mercy. Is more. Or if your tastes. Are a little bit older. My sin.

[32 : 13] Oh the bliss. Of this glorious thought. My sin. Not in part. But the whole. Is nailed. To his cross. And I bear it.

No more. Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. Oh my soul. Our time is almost done. Or probably is.

But it would be wrong. To avoid. Verse 17. Where we see. Esau. Too late. Realising.

What he has done. I think there are two things. That we need to note here. The first is. That at no point. Is there any sign.

Of repentance. At no point. Does Esau. Acknowledge. That he has done wrong. All he wants. Is the blessing. Is the blessing. He only wants.

[33 : 07] The good. That Isaac. Is the blessing. Is the blessing. Is the blessing. Is the blessing. Is the blessing. Is the blessing. Without wanting. To repair. His relationship. The second is. That he left it too late.

It's only at the end. Of Isaac's life. When the inheritance. Has already been divided up. That Esau expresses. Any desire.

For what he had lost. It seems like. There was quite some time. In between. Possibly decades even. And yet Esau never thought about it.

Until it was too late. Be careful. You don't leave it. Too long. You cannot respond to God.

With indifference. Forever. One day. You will come before him. Either in terror. Or in joy filled awe.

[34 : 03] Because of what Christ. Has done for you. As verse 15 says. Don't miss out. On the grace. It is there.

For the taking. It is free. You can share. In this glorious hope. Unlike with Jacob. And Esau. There is not just one blessing.

There is more than enough. For you. And for me. And so as we think. Back to the start. And what we have lived through.

Over the last six months. What is going to keep you going. For the next six months. Whatever they might bring. What about the next six years.

Or the next six decades. Even. What are you living for? Are you longing. For that heavenly city? Are you striving towards it.

[35 : 04] In the strength that God gives. Or are you trying to. Get there. On your own efforts. Can you come. To that mountain.

Of God's glory. With joy. Because your life. Is in Christ. Next.