

Hebrews 12: 1-17 -- A Father and Sons -

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PRAYER:

Gracious Father, we praise you for your presence with us. Again, we long for the day when every creature will rise and sing your praises and every knee will bow and call Jesus Christ, Lord. We thank you that His kingdom has already come and that he reigns and rules among his people. We thank you that we are citizens of a greater kingdom. We praise you for the presence of our King and His royal visits to us in the power of His Holy Spirit. We pray as we turn again to your word today that we may have some sense that King Jesus is seated upon his throne and that He is speaking to us through His Word. That all our hearts may be strangely warmed by His presence. That our minds may be illumined by the truth of his revelation. That our wills may be bowed down before him, and that our whole beings may be responding to him. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. So we pray you would take your word. That you would break it down for us, like the loaves that you, Lord Jesus, broke by the sea and distribute to each according to the need You see, we have. And so feed us and transform us we pray through your word, by your spirit, for your glory. And this we pray together in Jesus, our Savior's name. Amen. Please be seated.

SCRIPTURE READING:

Now as we continue our readings in the great Letter to the Hebrews we are today in Hebrews Chapter 12. Our verses are verses three through 17. But let us begin to read at the beginning of the chapter in Hebrews chapter 12 and verse one, you'll find the passage in the Pew Bible page 1008. And for our children who have their children's Bible, it's on page 1503. Hebrews Chapter 12. Let us Hear God's Word.

The author has gone through the great list of the heroes of the faith who have been faithful witnesses. And now he says to the Christians, to whom he is writing.

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 fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to 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 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, 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 peaceful 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.

Christians often find life in general and the Christian life in particular very hard going. And that was certainly true of these Christians to whom the anonymous author of Hebrews was writing. We've already noticed in our studies in Hebrews some of the privations that they experienced, some of the things that they suffered and the obstacles that they found so difficult in their Christian life. And he is coming to them, as he says at the end of the letter, with a word of exhortation, encouragement, a word of pastoral

counsel and help. When people come to us as ministers, as pastors for help, we often notice that the same issues recur again and again. And underneath the diversity of situations with which people struggle, we notice frequently the same basic issues. When someone has fallen into grievous sin and entangled themselves, we notice that unless their affection towards their sinful practice is broken; Unless the power of that affection is severed, there is little hope that they will actually be able to make much progress. You do not turn away from that which you love most. Such people want their embarrassment and shame covered, but they do not want their lives transformed. They want Jesus to do a fix it up job, but they do not want Jesus to destroy their affection. And what pastors seek to do is to bring all of the gospel artillery to bear upon that affection, praying that the gospel will destroy it. Sadly, like our Lord Jesus, they often see people turning away. They may come back again for a little help because they are in difficulties again. But if the affection isn't broken they will come back and back and back and back without ever being delivered from the deep problem.

There is another situation that ministers often find themselves encountering. Christians come, and to be honest life is difficult and hard. And it looks as though both of these situations were in view when the author wrote these words here. And what you need to do. You do it in the first instance. You do it in the second instance. What you understand is here is somebody who comes, they may have been a Christian many years, but like the Hebrews (remember in Chapter five), they have been professing Christians for such a length of time, they ought to be able to sit down with others who are struggling and say, this is how the gospel works. But in actual fact, they need to be taken back to first principles themselves. There is nothing more important in understanding the Christian life than understanding its first principles. And many a Christian, especially in our particular environment, in the part of the world in which we live, with the kind of Christianity that is peddled to us, one of our greatest needs and therefore one of the problems that so often presents itself to ministers all over the place is that people who have been Christians for years do not yet understand the first principles of the Christian life. And therefore they do not make real advance.

And that's his concern now. He spread before these Christians so many dimensions of the wonderful grace of God in Jesus Christ, in the Gospel. The absolute sufficiency of Jesus Christ for all of his people in all of the world for all time and all eternity. But the problem now is this. They need to be taught the A, B C's of what it means to be a

Christian. They need to learn again the first principles of the Christian life. And in these verses, too dense for us to study in detail today, there are three words I think that stand out. And perhaps they stood out to you as we read through this passage because they're words in each of the three cases, words that are repeated. And repetition is there to make you think, Oh, I should take notice of this.

The first of these three words is the word endurance. You notice it's language that he uses right from the very beginning. We are to run with endurance, the race that is set before us. Jesus endured the cross. Verse three. Jesus endured from sinners hostility against himself. And then in verse seven, It is for discipline that you have to endure. Now, at the back of his mind, there seems to be this picture of the Christian life as a long distance race. And if you are going to finish -- complete the long distance race -- there is one thing that is absolutely essential. That you keep running. That you keep going. That you run through the pain barriers. That you fix your eyes, as he says here, on what awaits you at the destination. But that you are absolutely, totally committed to enduring whatever pain or obstacle there may be in the race. And he uses here an expression that's become something of an old friend to us, that Greek word for endurance that conveys the picture of somebody who is able to remain steady and stable under enormous pressure.

I always think of the great Olympic weightlifters as they stand on the stage with these huge weights in their hands and their whole being seems to be on the point of buckling. But they are determined to endure the pain, the trial, the suffering, the weight -- for the sake of the prize. And this is one of the reasons why one of the great watchwords of the Old Testament is, "Wait for the Lord. Be strong and of a good courage and wait for the Lord". Now, of course, he's saying the Lord will provide you with all assistance as you look to him. The Lord, as the hymn we teach our children says, "If we ask the Savior to help you comfort, strengthen and keep you he is willing to aid you. He will carry you through." It's amazing to me how we teach that to the children, first principles of how the gospel works, then when we grow up, we forget them ourselves. And the flotsam and jetsam, the wrecks of Christian life float into the lives of elders and pastors and leaders in Christian congregations because grown ups have forgotten that you need to learn to endure. And in order to endure, you need to have your eyes riveted on Jesus Christ. And people will come and say, Now there must be another way. Can you just take the pain away? That's what I actually. What I didn't want that, I wanted somebody who

would help me by making my life a little easier. So that my Christian life could be easier. My dear friends, where did we ever get the idea the Christian life is easy? It's not meant to be easy. Have you grasped that first principle of living the Christian life? It was meant to be hard. Because what God is doing in your life is not something trivial. It is something utterly impossible. And it takes massive pressure to produce it. John Bunyan says somewhere that he had heard that there was a country where trees grew but never bore fruit because in that country there was never -- winter. You know somebody, I think they flew off the handle a few weeks ago. Not at me. I don't know where they flew off the handle, but they were full of regret. And they they said to me, "You know, the thing that puzzles me is I'm usually a very patient person". Well, I'm not a very patient person, but on that occasion I thought I ought to be as patient as I can be. And so I. I bit my lip. But what I wanted to say to them was this. And I tried to give them a hint. You're not a patient person. You're only a person whose patience has never been tested. And that you are a patient person is a figment of your imagination. Because patience and endurance can be produced only by one thing. Pressure. Trial. Affliction. Difficulty. And the writer is saying to these Christians, because some of them have not only gone soft hearted, they've gone soft headed. You need to learn that the Christian life was never meant to be easy. Where in all the world did you get that screwball idea? What television programs have you been watching? What stupid pseudo Christian literature have you been reading? It says, "You haven't yet resisted to the shedding of your blood". Let's talk about difficulty. "You haven't yet resisted to the shedding of your blood". The Christian life was never meant to be easy. Because if it were easy you and I would never be built up with this kind of strength and endurance. Remember how Paul puts it. Romans Chapter five. He says it's "affliction and tribulation that produces endurance". Now, my dear friends, have you got that? That will silence most of our complaints about the Christian life has become difficult for me, and it should be easy. It was never meant to be easy. Because what God wants to do in your life isn't easy. It's not easy for him. And it's not going to be easy for you. It's not easy for him because it cost him the lifeblood of his son in order to effect it. And it's not going to be easy for you because he means to take you from where you are and eventually make you more and more like his son. So first principle endurance because the Christian life is difficult and God sees this is what we need.

Second word. Actually, it's two words stuck together, at least in English, but it's one word in the text here. The second word is childtraining. Now, actually, this is, this is the word

that appears most frequently in this passage. You look down. Look down at the passage. It's not in my face. Look down at the passage and you're going to say, "Actually, the word that appears most frequently in this passage is the word discipline". Now that's what I mean. Because the word that's translated discipline in this passage, and this is almost unique I think in the New Testament, this word appears in seven consecutive verses. So it's huge. But the word that's translated as discipline here means child-training. It comes out of the atmosphere of the home and the family. And that's why you see suddenly in verse five, all of the language is family language. Have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? And he quotes these marvelous words from the third chapter of the Book of Proverbs. And incidentally, notice he uses the present tense there. In the Bible, God, present tense, addresses you as sons.

Now, what's this child training all about? Well, he says, first of all, it's a mark of his love. The Heavenly Father disciplines the one he loves. Verse six. See how significant this is. You notice then what he goes on to say in verse seven. He says in verse seven, God is treating you as sons. I actually think that is one of the most important statements in the whole of the New Testament. If you want to understand what it means to be a Christian, then God is not going to treat you as though you were illegitimate and he didn't care about you. God is going to treat you as a son. And he is going to bend all of his energy to transforming you into the likeness of his own beloved son. And, you know, when we, when we go to others and we say, "My life is falling apart, I can't understand what God is doing." There is one answer. You know, I sometimes say fundamentalist Christians always want one simple answer to every question. And God doesn't give us simple answers to every question. But there is, in a sense, one simple answer to this question, "What on earth is God doing in my life?" The answer is He's treating you as a son. "Oh", you say, "He wouldn't treat his son like that. His son wouldn't be bashed around like that. A real father with his son would make sure he did everything he could to protect him from sadness and pain and tears and challenges and difficulties". No, says the writer, that would be a sign the child wasn't legitimate. Think of God's only begotten Son. And his life. And how his Heavenly Father loved him and all that he had to endure that the author has spoken about. If I could just grasp this, both in the joys of life and the sorrows of life, in the triumphs of life and in the afflictions of life. My son, I am treating you as one of my children. And I'm training you. And I'm strengthening you and I'm going to transform you so that the family likeness you bear will not primarily be the

family likeness of the family in which you were born, but the family likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Is that the way you think about yourself? Every situation that causes pain. I'm just a little child, Heavenly Father. I can hardly imagine what it is that you're training me for. I understand there is an enormous distance to go. But this one thing I know. I am your child. And you are training me for glory. So hold on to me. Continue to be my father. I glance around. Is he watching me? Does he see my little triumphs of faith? Does he see my disasters on the field? Is he there? Yes! He's there because he's child training you.

So he speaks, first of all, about what he sees we need. He speaks secondly about what God is doing in our lives, and then he speaks, thirdly, about what God has in mind for us. Because the third big word is the word holiness. God, the Heavenly Father is utterly passionate about holiness. The problem is that I am not. He is utterly passionate about holiness. Everything else is utterly incidental as far as he is concerned in my life. He does not care if I make money. He does not care if I have a great job and a big house. He does not care if I have a good reputation in the world. How do I know that? Because he didn't care about it in the case of his only begotten son. Because he had a far bigger vision for his son than these toys. And he has a far bigger vision for your life than these toys and bobbles that will disappear in the three score years and ten that we count so valuable and by which we measure one another and our success in life. But what the Heavenly Father is intent on doing is creating what this writer calls holiness. He child trains us for our good. Verse ten that we may share in His Holiness. And so he says, You notice in verse 12, Strive for it. Isn't that interesting? Lift your drooping hands, strengthen your weak knees, make straight paths for your feet so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed and strive for peace with everyone and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. Beloved have you got that first principle? No holiness. No heaven. No, holiness, you will never see the Lord. And the wonder of the gospel, therefore, is that he has this passion to create holiness in your life so that when you do see him face to face you will not burn up in his presence but be welcomed into it. That's the whole point he's making.

And you see the wonder of this letter is that for 11 mighty chapters, he has been undergirding these stunning exhortations by setting before us the adequacy of our Savior to do all of these things in our lives that the Heavenly Father purposes.

You notice how in verse 15 he warns us against something? He says there's a danger. You'll notice it's in quotation marks and verse 13. "See to it" verse 15. "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God, that no" quotes "a root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble". What's this "root of bitterness"? Why is it in quotation marks anyway? What's it doing in quotation marks? Why didn't the ESV translators tell us what it's doing in quotation marks instead of just putting it in quotation marks? Well, it's actually a reference to Deuteronomy 29:17. "Where the root of bitterness is manifested. When people say this, I shall be safe. Though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart". "I shall be safe", because, of course, God is gracious. And because God is gracious, I can continue to walk in the stubbornness of my heart. And he says, say that's a root that ultimately produces bitterness. It's very testing, isn't it? It's very testing.

It's one of the most agonizing things about being a minister of the gospel that you can pour out the word of the gospel with all your heart and soul and it encounters stubbornness of heart. Where people say, "But I've got the grace of God. So it doesn't really matter what I do in response to his word". And he's saying that's the "root of bitterness" that leads ultimately to disaster. Oh, you say I wish it were some other way. But what a frail and feeble bunch we would be if it were some other way. Let's look around the congregation when you leave and think about the sufferings of God's people in this church family. And how strong those have grown who have suffered much. And let us, by God's grace, get it into our heads that the Christian life was never meant to be easy. And my dear friends, it's going to get harder. It is going to get harder. And harder. And harder.

But all this is said because there is a Savior who is utterly sufficient to give his children endurance. To train his children in Christ-likeness. And to create a holiness, within us, without which no one will ever see the Lord. And so, you know, if the author of the letter were to stand at the door at the end of the service. (Don't do this to me. It's so embarrassing). I'd hope you'd want to give him a big hug and say this is the first time I've ever heard you preach. But that was the word I needed to hear more than anything else in all the world. You know, one of the most unlikely people said that to me this morning at the end of the first service. I was kind of gobsmeared. Because it wasn't the kind of word I thought they might need to hear. I thought they would need a gentle word,

an encouraging word, a soothing word. And in their trials and their difficulties. But God wouldn't cheap change us like that. And nor does the letter to the Hebrews.

Well, doesn't that make you want the supper? To come and say to Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, how much I need you to keep me going. And you will. You will. You will.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Our Heavenly Father strengthen us we pray that we may endure. Fill us with a longing to be more like Christ. Help us to run the race to the end. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.