

Hebrews 12:12-29

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[0:00] Now please turn up Hebrews chapter 12 and have a look at verse 12. Lift your drooping hands! Drooping hands and weak knees. It's a pretty honest description of the Christian life a lot of the time, isn't it? Whether it's the strong pull that we feel that we can't deny to follow our desires off track and into sin, or that sense of disappointment that rises up because you've given into temptation again in the same area, or because of the opposition that you experience from friends or colleagues because you're a Christian, or simply that you are fed up.

God hasn't given you the life that you wanted, and you're discouraged and disillusioned. Your hands are drooping, and your knees are weak, and you feel wobbly.

Remember that famous footage? It was back in 2016. It's quite a long time ago now. Johnny Brownlee, the British triathlete, that famous footage. He's leading the race as he's coming into the end, and the camera is going along beside him, and his head is rolling. His eyes are spinning. He's running. His cadence has gone completely. His legs aren't working as they should do. He's absolutely exhausted. I think we can feel a bit like that spiritually sometimes. It was certainly that way for the Hebrews, as we've discovered as we've gone through this letter. They're weary. They're discouraged. They're disillusioned, and they want to give up. And this section we've seen back from the beginning of chapter 11 is focused on encouraging them to keep going. Drooping hands, yes.

[2:10] Yes, weak knees, yes, but keep going. There is a great cloud of witnesses, chapter 11. Those who have gone ahead, and the struggles that you experience, chapter 12, verses 1 to 11, what we saw last time, those aren't something to despise. The struggles that you're going through are not something to think badly of, actually, however difficult they are. Because they are, we were told, the loving discipline of our Heavenly Father. The one who holds the whole world in his hands allows these trials, whether it's opposition or hardship, even our own sin, to train and instruct us, and to work in us the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Chapter 12, verse 11. 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. Just as good earthly fathers discipline their children, so it is with our Father in heaven. And it's not just that God, our Father, is treating us like the perfect Father would, the perfect earthly Father would, but he is treating us as he did his own Son, the Lord Jesus. Remember, just as Christ came in the flesh and had to be made perfect through suffering, we were told, so it is with all of God's children. The path to perfection, the path to glory, is a cross-shaped, suffering-paved path. This discipline, these trials, the suffering, that you're enduring, whether because of your own sin or because of someone else's sin, or just because the world is a broken place full of thorns and thistles, these are somehow in the infinite wisdom of God for our good. There is a day coming, you know, whatever you're struggling with now, there is a day coming when you will be able to say with the psalmist in Psalm 119, verse 71, it is good for me that I was afflicted. This evening you hear that and you think that is impossible, it sounds like insanity to me, but there is a day coming when you will see clearly and you will be able to say, it is good for me that I was afflicted. Well, this evening, to people with drooping hands and weak knees, to people like you and me, the author gives us a charge and a motivation. A charge and a motivation. Point number one is the charge. Here it is. Get up and after godliness. Get up and after godliness. Verses 12 to 17.

Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees. All the stuff that I said last time about discipline, all the stuff that I said the week before that in chapter 11 about the people that are cheering you on that have gone ahead of you. Therefore, lift your drooping hands, 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. He's alluding here to Isaiah 35 verses 3 and 4. Here's what Isaiah says, strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious

heart, be strong, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance. With the recompense of God, he will come and save you. Get up and get going. Strengthen your faith. Clear the way. Get rid of the hindrances. Do you remember? He told us this last time. Get rid of those hindrances. Clear the way.

Those things that might cause you to trip, get rid of them so that you can strengthen your limping faith rather than let it fracture completely. It is easy for weak faith to be weakened further by focusing on the weakness and worrying about it or complaining about it or adopting a defeatist attitude. Lots of us can feel a bit like that sometimes. Oh, I don't think I'm ever going to finish this race.

My faith is weak. I feel like I'm about to fall over at every turn and I'm looking up ahead to glory and I'm thinking to myself, I'm never going to make it. Run the race marked out for you, you say, author to the Hebrews. Well, no, I can't. I'm not going to be able to make it. But don't forget, Isaiah 35, be strong. Fear not. Your God will come and save you. Your God will come and he will save you.

He will get you to glory. If you are genuinely trusting the Lord Jesus Christ, the day is coming when your God will come and save you fully and finally into his presence. This experience that we go through now, this struggle is only for a time. Your God will come and save you.

[7:02] So, in this time, he says, use it well, verse 14, while you wait for future glory, strive for peace with everyone and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. It is literally, go on striving for peace with everyone. Go on making the effort. These things don't just fall into your lap.

It doesn't just happen. Make the effort to live out the peaceful fruit of righteousness that he talked about in verse 11. That means strive for peace with everyone. Pursue peace with everyone. As those who know and serve the Lord Jesus, the Prince of Peace, we are to work hard to cultivate peace wherever we go.

We are to be people of peace. And not just pursuing peace with people who are like us. People that we like. People that we find it easy to be peaceable with because they like the same things we do and they think the same way we do. We're to pursue peace with everyone, he says.

Even those who oppose your Christian faith and make life difficult for you. Strive for peace with them. You don't have to agree with them. We certainly don't join them in their sin. Pursuing peace with that colleague who doesn't like you because your Christian faith means that you simply can't cheer the things that they want you to cheer. It obviously doesn't mean that you agree with them, but it means that you strive to treat them with respect and serve them where you can. Strive for peace with everyone. He doesn't say it'll be easy, but it's what those who have experienced peace with God must endeavor to do. You don't need to right every wrong. You know that? You don't need to fight every battle. You know that? Some of us think like that, I think, sometimes, but it just robs us of peace.

And actually, it makes us annoying to people around us. We lose our own peace because we feel like we have to fight every battle. We have to put out every fire, wherever that might be. But that kind of person is quite annoying. In fact, in many cases, people think that they're opposed, they're being persecuted for their Christian faith when they're simply being criticized for being annoying.

[9:18] Above all, of course, this peace should be evident in our life together here in the church community. A community of those who have experienced peace with God are to live out the peace of God together.

And a peaceable spirit, I want to say, particularly in our day, particularly at this moment in our culture, a peaceable spirit is perhaps one of the areas where we will be most distinctive to those people. You don't need to look very far to see just how angry people are all the time. In traffic, in queues. I was in the airport this week. People were raging everywhere because they couldn't get to where they needed to get to, or people were in front of them, or their group wasn't called early enough or whatever it might be. And then you go online and it's taken to a whole new level. There's just rage everywhere. In a culture like this, people who pursue peace stand out in an attractive way. You can disagree peaceably. Not talking about some big linking of arms and we all get along and don't worry about our disagreements. Don't worry about the way you treated me. That's fine. We'll just get along and rub each other's backs. No. But it is possible to pursue peace and to pursue peace in our relationships, particularly in the church. Strive to do it, he says. Do what it takes to right wrongs, to resolve grudges, to set aside grievances. Strive for peace with everyone.

Alongside that, he says, we're also to strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. Now, holiness here, holiness that he's speaking about here is a life that is increasingly transformed

by and dedicated to God. We're told back in chapter 10, verse 14, that we have been perfected through Christ's once-for-all sacrifice. Made holy in that sense.

Here we're being told to go and live that out. Live out the holiness. You have been made holy, therefore live it out. And as has been the case throughout the letter, that is a matter of the heart. The author explains it negatively with reference to figures from the Old Testament. You see that? Verse 15, 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. Multiple bad examples from the Old Testament. [11 : 58] He talks here about failing to obtain the grace of God and the root of bitterness that grows up. He is talking about the wilderness generation. The ones who hardened their hearts to God's Word and failed, therefore, to enter the promised land. They were bitter about God's providence, and they grumbled about their lot. They grumbled in their bitterness because they didn't have what they wanted.

And then he also names Esau. Esau is an example of one who allowed his appetites, first of all, for food, when his hunger led him to give up his birthright, his status as an heir, and then for foreign wives, his appetite for them to lead him away from the Lord altogether. And this went so deep in his heart that in the end he wandered away into complete apostasy. When our appetites are in the driving seat, when we devote ourselves to, when we give ourselves, when we worship our pleasure and satisfaction, those things take control of us, and they will always, always lead us off course. You see it when, like Esau, we set aside what God wants in order to have what we want. When our appetites are in the driving seat, and we walk across what God has said in his Word in order to have what we want.

And Esau's example here should sober us. It is possible to do that so often that you wander so far that it's impossible to get back. One commentator says this, Do not fall into Esau's crass spiritual stupidity. Profanity and fornication are extremely short-sighted, and the consequences will follow. A man rapes what he sows. Esau could not undo his selling of his birthright, although he sought the opportunity with tears. Here's the thing. Let me say this. If you are wandering, now you're here this evening to keep up appearances, but you know in your heart of hearts, your heart is elsewhere. You are wandering from the Lord. Come back. Come back before it's too late.

Come quickly. Come now. Repent of whatever it is, and resolve to walk back to the Lord. Hard hearts will give up. This isn't what I want. God, you're being mean to me. I've had enough. Hard hearts will give up. Bitter hearts will spread their misery, drawing other people in with destructive results in the life of the church. When the root of bitterness is allowed to grow up, and it spreads through the relationships and the life of the church, the effect of that is toxic.

[14 : 45] Hard hearts give up. Bitter hearts spread their misery. Selfish hearts will follow their appetites into all kinds of trouble. The author is saying here, strive, do all that you can to keep your heart soft to the Lord, and to pursue the holiness, to pursue a life that is dedicated to God, that is needed if you will be there at the end, to behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And of course, let's remember that we do this together. The language throughout this section has the corporate community in view. To go back to Johnny Brownlee again, the Brownlee brothers. What was it that made that footage so compelling? It wasn't just Johnny's capacity to push himself into such pain. That in itself, for me anyway, was impressive. But it was what his brother Alistair did when he saw his brother about to stop in the race. He got hold of him, and he made sure to get him over the line. He gave up the position that he would have run past his brother and won the race himself. Instead, he stopped, put his arm around his brother, and in doing that, the other guy that was coming behind him ran past, and he won the race, and he carried his brother over the line. That's how the church should work in the race of the Christian life. We take hold of one another, drooping hands, weak knees. Perhaps we're not feeling that way. Well, we come along, and we put our arm around one another, and we carry each other forward in order that we make it to the end. That's the charge. Get after godliness and do it together. But then we're given a two-fold motivation for why we should do this, starting with the four in verse 18. Here's point number two, the motivation, and it's an encouragement and a warning. Verses 18 to 29, an encouragement and a warning. Here's the encouragement. Verse 18, remember where you are. Remember where you are, for you have not come to what can be touched, what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words may the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. Then 22, verse 22, but you have come to

Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. The author is describing here two covenant mountains. The first is Sinai and the giving of the old covenant law. The second is Zion and the spiritual realities of the new covenant. And the point the author is making is the same one he's made throughout the book. The second mountain is better, way better than the first, because it is the glorious mountain of the better covenant that enables us to worship the living God. When Israel gathered with Moses at the base of Sinai, the presence of God was terrifying and overwhelming. Fire and darkness and trumpets, the voice of God that struck fear in everyone. Even Moses, look, verse 21, even Moses, who was himself personally called by God to this ministry on recognizing the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man, he trembled. Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, I tremble with fear. He was terrified. But the church today is not at Sinai. We have come to Mount Zion, and the church is described as a great and awesome city, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. In verse 22, we come together with the angelic host as part of the great assembly of the redeemed, all of those whose names are written in the book of life, the many sons who are being brought to glory into the presence of God, verse 23, and with Christ, verse 24, whose blood shed for us and sprinkled to make atonement for our sin and open the door into the presence of God. That blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. This is where you are. Sinai was physical. It could be touched, and so it was temporary. Zion is spiritual. It is heavenly, and therefore it's eternal. Sinai brought separation from God along with fear and the threat of death. Zion is a picture of celebratory joy and life, the life that Christ has won for all who have put their faith in Him. Here is the first motivation to get up and after godliness, to pursue peace and holiness together as the church, because we are gathered in the heavenly Zion. The day-to-day, of course, that happens in the grit and the grime of London, but we are citizens of the heavenly city of life, not death. We are in fellowship with the living God, not standing far off in fear. This is why you are actually able to strive for peace and holiness.

[19:51] We've been brought near. We don't stand at a distance. And, of course, it also provides a great incentive to keep short accounts with God, doesn't it? When you sin, you don't run from God. You don't leave sin unconfessed. You go to Him. Christ has brought you to His presence. He has brought you to God. So, don't run from Him. Don't keep Him at arm's length. Go to Him. It's also a reminder of why we have reasons for joy, even when life is difficult. Because they are eternal, the realities that Zion represents transcend our current moment. They transcend your experience, however trying or tough it might be. The picture of joy and celebration that the author describes here is one that we will experience fully when we get to glory, but the knowledge and the certainty of that in the future should lighten the load for us in the present while we wait. While we are running the race, while we are finding it difficult and struggling, the promise of that future glory reaches back into our experience in the here and now and changes it for us. And of course, we experience our presence in heaven in a very specific way when we gather like this on the Lord's Day as we do this evening.

When the call to worship is given, we ascend into heaven. When John was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, Revelation 1 verse 10, he was caught up in the heavenly places. Paul told the Ephesians that they were located in two places. Firstly, Ephesians 1 verse 1, they're in Ephesus. But secondly, he emphasizes that they are in Christ, who is in turn at the right hand of God in heaven. Because you are in Christ, you are where He is. And He is at the right hand of the Father in heaven. That is why our author told us back in 10.25 not to forsake the meeting together as some are in the habit of doing. Because to do so would be to neglect going to heaven in worship. Wasn't that what he was so interested in beforehand?

One commentator says this, chapter 10 verse 19, we have boldness to enter the Holy of Holies in heaven. Because we have this boldness, let us draw near with true hearts, 10.22. When do we do this?

On the Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God, 4 verse 9, which is to say, on the Lord's Day. When we celebrate public worship like this each week, we do not come to a mountain that can be touched, a mountain that strikes terror in our bones. But we do come to a mountain, a heavenly Zion, the heavenly Zion. At our call to worship, we ascend to the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem, in the midst of a multitude of angels and the redeemed, into the presence of God himself.

That is why this time together is, hands down, the most important part of your week. It's why you should do everything that you can to set aside the Lord's Day to be at worship.

[23 : 12] What could be more vital than coming into the presence of the living God, talking to him, hearing his voice, eating with him at his table as we did this morning? The answer is nothing. Well, there's the encouragement. Remember where you are under the new covenant, in Christ, in heaven. But there's also a warning. Did you see that?

The warning. Here it is. Remember who God is. The encouragement is, remember where you are. The warning is, remember who God is. Verses 25 to 29.

Whilst there are two mountains, there is still only one God. So, verse 25, see that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens.

This phrase, yet once more, indicates the removal of things that are shaken, that is, things that have been made, in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

You may have heard unbelievers with a vague knowledge of the Bible will sometimes talk about the angry Old Testament God and the much more palatable New Testament version.

[24 : 53] That's all about Old Testament God for me. And then there's the idea that there is this more palatable, gentle Jesus in the New Testament. Now, Christians hear that, and then they'll try and explain that this is a distortion. Well, that's actually not how it is. You've misunderstood.

But then they themselves talk about, well, there was the old covenant, and now we're under grace. And they talk about it in such a way that still sounds a bit like God chilled out between Malachi and Matthew. The author here sets us straight. Don't refuse him who is speaking. Don't refuse the Lord. Because if the Old Testament people were judged for their hard-hearted rejection of God, verse 25, much less will we under the new covenant. There is a great cosmic shakedown coming, he's saying, where only the kingdom that cannot be shaken, the kingdom of God, will remain.

We should be hugely grateful that we belong to the enduring kingdom. But that doesn't mean that we're casual with God. God is awesome in majesty, supreme in power. He is, he tells us here, a consuming fire.

Our God is a consuming fire. You don't muck about with fire. We must worship him acceptably. Now, of course, this looks different in different cultures. There isn't one way or one style that we worship. But it can't mean anything goes. These verses make it clear that we can worship God unacceptably. That's why the Westminster Divines gave us the directory of worship. That's why we have the regulative principle of worship, that the elements of the worship service come from Scripture. We do what God tells us to do when we gather. But here's the keynote. Did you see it? The keynote of acceptable worship. Whatever other cultural elements there may be, here is the keynote of acceptable worship, reverence, and awe.

[26 : 58] We are drawn into the presence of the living God. We can call him our Father, but we mustn't confuse intimacy with informality. Our closeness to God doesn't remove our need for reverence, especially when we gather in this context. You can draw near to God anywhere, anytime, and you can speak to him as candidly and bluntly and with the most heartfelt cries imaginable.

Read the Psalms. It's all there. But when we gather for worship, we don't do it casually. Our service is structured in order to reflect this. God calls us into his presence at the call to worship.

We can't just wander in to his presence. He must call us, and he calls us at the beginning. We sing songs that focus on him more than on how we feel. We confess our sin. We allow his word to govern what we do. He tells us how he wants things to be. God really cares about how we approach him. Don't take him lightly. Reverence and awe. That's the warning. Remember who God is and live in light of his character.

So get up and after godliness. Strengthen your weak knees. Pursue peace and holiness in relationship with Christ. And do this because we have an awesome and majestic God. Let's pray.