

Epiphany

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[0:00] So as I was thinking about this morning, I was praying and I asked God about what verses might be good for this epiphany Sunday.

! And I felt drawn to the beginning of Hebrews 12. And if you were here last week, you would have heard Alex talking about the book of Hebrews and just some insights into how the writer just keeps pointing to Jesus.

And I'm just wondering if that's why God drew my attention to these words. Because if I was going to sum up Russ, we're going to be doing that a lot today, I would say that he just keeps pointing to Jesus.

Lots of nodding there. This is from Hebrews 12, just verses 1 and 2. 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.

[1:22] For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross. Well, I noticed this word perseverance.

Perseverance. I wonder, what do you think of when you hear that word perseverance? If I'm honest, what immediately came to mind was me slogging up Holly Lane during the Boxing Day run.

Noticing that I was somehow encouraging someone next to me who hadn't done it before. We were nearly halfway there. But really thinking, do you know what? My mum lives just down the road.

I might just opt out in Wellington Terrace. Like, does it really matter if you finish? But I know that our personal and our deeper responses to that question will no doubt surface much more emotional, spiritual, physical challenges.

That we may be in the midst of navigating right now or we've been through in the past. The dictionary says that perseverance is persistence in doing something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success.

[2:53] And as I've already invited us to start thinking, I wonder what is it that the Holy Spirit is going to reveal to us each personally this morning on this Epiphany Sunday as we ponder this theme of perseverance a bit more.

Epiphany, translated from the Greek, simply means to reveal. And in the Christian faith, specifically the revelation, as Alex said, that Jesus came to earth as the manifestation of God to reveal his love for all people.

For you and for I. And his plan to bring hope into a dark and chaotic world. And here, in this letter to the Hebrews, the writer continually draws the attention to Jesus.

The pioneer, the perfecter of faith. A few years ago, I read this book. And I'm not sure I finished it.

If you spoke to Pete, my husband, you would find out that there's a great deal of Christian books on our bookshelf that I've kind of got halfway through. And in my head, Martha's laughing.

[4:18] I'm going to finish them one day. But I feel very prompted to go back to this at the beginning of this year. A long obedience in the same direction. Eugene Peterson wrote this.

He's the guy who translated the Bible to the message version. And he reminds us that perseverance is not about us trying to attain perfection.

A few. And it's not about resignation. It doesn't really matter. Perseverance is a journey of discipleship. And central to that is the noticing that God sticks with us.

God sticks with us. He establishes a personal relationship with us and stays with it. The central reality for Christians is this personal, unalterable, persevering commitment that God makes to us.

Perseverance is not the result of our own determination. It's not the result of extraordinary stamina that we just kind of manage to survive faith because of.

[5:36] It's about this commitment that God makes to us because he is righteous and he sticks with us.

Christian discipleship is a process of paying more and more and more attention to God's righteousness and less and less attention to our own kind of motives.

Our own moods. Our own morals. It's about believing in God's will and purposes. Making a map of faithfulness.

I just want to draw your attention to that phrase. Making a map of faithfulness. The faithfulness of God. We're going to come back to that. It's not about charting the rise and fall of our own enthusiasms.

I'm wondering what you're noticing about your own enthusiasms at the beginning of a new year particularly. What are you going to take up? What are you going to give up? What are you going to do more of? What are you going to do less of?

[6:46] Discipleship isn't about that. It's out of this reality of God sticking with us that we acquire perseverance.

I'm just going to read you this bit where Eugene Peterson reflects on these words from Hebrews. This is what the writer of the New Testament letters to the Hebrews Christians did.

He sang a litany of people who lived by faith. That is people who centered their lives on the righteousness of God. Who stuck by them through thick and thin.

So that they were able to persevere. They lived with the uncommon steadiness of purpose. And with a most admirable integrity. None of them lived without sin.

They all made their share of mistakes. And engaged in episodes of disobedience and rebellion. But God stuck with them.

[7:50] And surely that is how they learned to stick with God. And out of this litany comes the call. Strip down.

Start running. Never quit. This is the message version of those words. No extra spiritual fat. No parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

Who both began and finished the race we are in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed. That exhilarating finish in and with God.

He could put up with anything along the way. The cross. Shame. Whatever. And now he's there. In the place of honour. Right alongside God.

I recently worked my way through this discipleship sort of programme. It's an eight week programme.

[8 : 50] It's called Keys to Freedom. And as it comes to an end. It draws the reader's attention to four things to stay in. Four key things to stay in.

As disciples of Jesus. I guess like rhythms that help us to map this faithfulness of God. And live from a place of his grace and his love.

And those four things are prayer. I'm wondering if you might guess what they are. Prayer. His word. Fellowship and community.

And accountability in relationship. And even if these four disciplines are already a significant part of our walk with God.

I know for some of us in the room they will be. Or there's ones that we're wanting to lean into a bit more. There may be some of us sitting in the room who are thinking.

[9 : 50] I don't really know what it means to pray. Or to read God's word with intention. I would love to just encourage us this morning.

To consider God's invitation. To get these things into our lives more consistently as we head into 2026. So that's what we're going to do now.

As we come to the end of this short time. I'm going to give you a little prompt. A little nudge. But we're going to just spend a bit of quiet time with God.

And ask the Holy Spirit to show us. What is it that we might notice this morning. About these areas of our relationship with God. So I'll just read a little something and then I'll pause.

So prayer. Smith Wigglesworth. They always call him Wigglesworth. Wigglesworth famously said. Rarely do I pray for an hour.

[10 : 59] But rarely does an hour go by when I do not pray. And in Philippians 4. Verses familiar to lots of us I'm sure.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Let your gentleness be evident to all. In all things through prayer and petition.

Present your requests to God. With thanksgiving. And the peace of God which passes all understanding. Will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

So I wonder what might God be saying to you. About your prayer life this year. How do we stay in God's word?

He uses his word to teach us. Speak directly to life situations. Give wisdom to help us to know what to do. What to say. And speaks to our true identity in Jesus.

[12 : 07] John 8 says. If you hold to my teaching. You really are my disciples. And then you will know the truth. And the truth will set you free.

What might God be saying to us. About engaging with his word this year. And fellowship and community.

Psalm 92 says. Well it talks about people who are planted. In the house of the Lord. Flourishing. The church is God's plan.

For his house on earth. And I wonder what God might be saying to us. About how we engage with church community this year. Let's just ask him that question.

And finally accountability. In relationship.

[13 : 16] This can be harder. This involves real trust. I wonder what it means to you. Who are you noticing. Is around you.

That you're journeying with. In accountability. Proverbs 27 says. You use steel to sharpen steel. And one friend sharpens another.

I wonder who are the friends. Who will sharpen you. In your faith this year. Well I. Am thankful. And I know that. One of my friends. Who does that for me. Is Tamara. And I got to know Tamara and Russ. 18 years ago.

When they moved to Clevedon. Russ. We worked together. For over eight years. We've done church. For 18 years. And have grown this family friendship. That I believe will be lifelong.

[14 : 21] And I do thank God. Russ. For his gift in you. Of this relentless perseverance. Perseverance. To always point to Jesus. And the hope we have in him. It is a gift.

To others. And as I finish. What came to mind. Was an article that Pete wrote recently. And it's about evergreen trees. And as I often do.

I did a bit of learning. And it really stirred in me. A picture of God's invitation. And kind of plan for our lives. And I wanted to leave it with you guys. As we finish. It's.

Just. It spoke about evergreen trees. Hoping Pete's not going to correct me. I've run this by him. And evergreen trees.

Are built. In a way. That means they can. Flourish. And. Be green. In all seasons.

[15 : 18] Do you know that they are built. To retain water. They have deep roots. For stability. But get this guys. They're not actually green.

The whole time. They're in a state. Of constant. Renewal. So parts of them. Are green. All of the time. And. To us.

They seem green. All the time. But this state. Of constant. Renewal. Means that they can flourish. In all seasons. Sustaining life.

Not just for themselves. But life. Fruit. For others. They can be shelter. For others. Even in the toughest. Of seasons. And my prayer.

For you today. As we finish. For you both. Is this blessing. From Psalm 1. Blessed. Are those.

[16 : 14] Whose delight. Is in the law. Of the Lord. And who meditates. On his word. Day and night. Those people. Are like trees.

Planted by streams. Of water. Which yield. Which yield. Its fruit. In season. And whose leaves. Do not wither. Bless you guys. To be with us.