

How God treats his children

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[0 : 00] In your struggle against sin, you have not 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.

[1 : 09] 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 what? 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.

For you have not come to 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 made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.

[2 : 30] For they could not endure the order that was given. If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned. Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, I tremble with fear.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in feastal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

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 they 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.

[3 : 53] 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.

I don't know if you've ever heard of the Appalachian Trail. It's the longest continuous walking trail in the world. It goes up the east coast of America. It's, I understand, three and a half kilometres long. I say I understand because, personally, I haven't experienced it, but it's three and a half thousand kilometres. Did I say three and a half kilometres? It's considerably longer than that. It's three and a half thousand kilometres long.

So it's as far as walking from John O'Groats to Land's End three times. Every year, about 2,000 people turn up at the start, intending to walk the trail.

Most of those who begin drop out in the first week. And the reason they do so is because they come expecting a nice stroll through the woods, sun to be shining, birds to be singing, squirrels to be playing.

[5 : 03] And what they get instead are rocks and mountains and rain and hypothermia and flies and bears and snakes and they drop out.

The Bible book of Hebrews is all about finishing, getting to the end, completing. Not just the beginning of the Christian life, but enduring to the end.

Look down at Hebrews chapter 12 and see that theme here that you have to endure. Verse 1, since we're surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses that we were looking at last week with Nick from chapter 11.

Since we're surrounded by so many Christians who've gone before us, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us, here it comes, run with endurance.

Same thing in verse 2, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, what did he do? He endured the cross.

[6 : 08] Verse 3, consider him who endured. Verse 7, it is for discipline that you have to endure and that's the question. Will you?

Will you keep going all the way to the end? If you're a Christian, will you finish the race? Will you be able to say, as the Apostle Paul said at the end of his life, I have finished the race, I did get to the end, I completed it.

Or, will you be like Esau, who is held up in our passage as an alternative. He stands for the man of the world. He's the opposite of what Hebrews means by endure.

He gets mentioned down here in our passage in verses 16 and 17. Do you remember the story of Esau? He's a man with a younger twin called Jacob.

And they're the two sons of Isaac. He'll remember is the promised son of Abraham. So, you've got Esau and his younger twin brother, Jacob. And you'll remember that Esau is the hunter-gatherer type, the alpha male, the macho man, who comes in from hunting one day with a brace of rabbits over his shoulder.

[7 : 24] They're not brace of rabbits. What would you call a whole load of dead rabbits over your shoulder? Anyway, a flock of rabbits over his shoulder. A herd of rabbits. I don't know what it is. He's starving hungry.

Meanwhile, his younger brother, Jacob, he's more of the stay-at-home, poetry-writing, painting, cooking type. And he's got a delicious bread and lentil stew ready on the fire.

Or, give me a bit, says Esau. Sure, says Jacob, but it's going to cost you. Whatever. Name your price, my good man. So, the quick thinking, Jacob says, give me your birthright.

The rights of being the firstborn in the family. I'll do you a swap. All the privileges of that, including the larger bit of inheritance for some of my food.

And Esau agrees and he swaps his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew. Birthright? Why, that's all about promises in the future. That's a promise from your dad for the future.

[8 : 28] That's about privilege and position and power in the future. And Esau squandered all of that promise just to satisfy today's cravings.

And you see, he stands in this passage for the man of the world. There's a warning to us of somebody who does not endure. He's somebody who wants it now rather than in the future.

Maybe that you've seen a single meal like this, a moment of choice, ruin somebody, ruin a Christian. They indulge themselves.

They squander their future with God for a quick nibble of something now. I can think of a Christian minister throwing it all away just for a fumble with somebody who wasn't his wife.

Or the Christian first-year student who gives in in freshers' week to the hunger for whatever is the 2018 equivalent of lentil stew. Or the worker who slips in with the office gossip or the antics at the Christmas party just so they fit in.

[9 : 39] And the thing is, that single meal doesn't just ruin their life now, but ruins a whole eternity for them. So they never, look down to verse 14, they never see the Lord.

Or verse 15, they fail to obtain the grace of God. And that's even clearer in the other example, the other warning example that we're given in the second half of verse 15.

Look down to that. Where the writer says, see that nobody fails to obtain the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble.

Because by it many have become defiled. Now that little phrase, root of bitterness, see that's in inverted commas, it's a quote from the Old Testament from Deuteronomy 29. This is from another story when the whole nation of Israel are traveling from Egypt to the Promised Land.

They're on a journey and their journey is through the wilderness. It's tough, it's a pilgrim's progress. It's an Appalachian trail. And on the journey, the nation passed by other nations and they can see them with their gods and their lifestyle and they say, do you know what, we'd rather be like them.

[11:02] We'd like what they've got. And that thought, that desire, that wanting the security that comes from an idol, that was like planting a poisonous plant in the garden.

Just a small root. Began with just one or two people. But that deadly root of bitterness, that deadly weed grew up and turned out to be Japanese knotweed.

The whole garden infested. Never mind the Promised Land, they ended up saying, you know, let's stop here, let's be like them. I mean, it's okay. God won't mind, we're safe.

And the Lord says, no, you're not safe. Verse 15, you will fail to obtain the grace of God. And you know the story, they never did get to the Promised Land.

They failed to get in that first generation. Now that's the warning of Hebrews. Endure. Keep going.

[12:09] Don't get waylaid. It's a bit like the patient voice of the sat-nav man. We call him Graham in our car. Graham very politely but insistently warns us, turn around when possible.

Hebrews is saying, set your spiritual sat-nav onto the final destination. Enter that into your sat-nav. That's where you're headed. Don't think, oh, that looks a nice turning off.

But keep going, following the directions. Don't be like Esau who squandered his future blessing for a plate of lentil stew. Don't be like Israel who were attracted by the gods they passed and threw away the blessing of their Promised Land.

Keep going on the route mapped out for you. Endure. That's the big message. Endure all the way to the finishing tape. Why?

Well, from verse 18 we get two reasons and that's what we're going to think about for the rest of this morning. Endure. Why? For two reasons. Here's the first one.

[13:20] The first reason why keep going and it is this. How much better is the place to which Christians come? And this is the first paragraph, verses 18 to 24, and you've got one big contrast.

So look down to verse 18 where the writer says, you have not come to one place. And verse 22 he says, but you have come to another place.

So verse 18, you've not come to Mount Sinai. That's where the children of Israel went, where they got the Ten Commandments. On their journey to the Promised Land, they went to that mountain and God gave them his instructions.

You've not come there, says the writer. But verse 22, you have come to Mount Zion, the hill on which Jerusalem was built. But here is a picture of heaven, the heavenly Jerusalem.

So verse 18, you have not come to the mountain where Israel got the Ten Commandments. Verse 22, you have come to the mountain which is heaven.

[14:28] And basically the point the writer is making is the place you've come to is loads better. How much better is the place to which we come?

Now look down to what he says about the Mount Sinai mountain, the Ten Commandments mountain. And the main thing he says about it is it was scary.

On the day when God came to the mountain to meet Moses, look at what he says it was like in verse 18 and following. There were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud.

The mountain was wrapped in smoke. It, I guess, looked like one of those huge power stations with great mushroom clouds of smoke above them. And of course he couldn't touch the mountain.

There was a line, a fence, a kind of police barrier to keep the people away. And if you did touch it, if even an animal wandered in and touched it, well then that would be the end of them.

[15:27] And you certainly couldn't see what was going on up the top of the mountain. I mean, the whole mountain was wobbling. The trumpets were getting louder and louder like it was somebody turning up the volume until it hurt.

No wonder all the people were scared stiff. I mean, they were trembling. It was really, really frightening. And the thing is that the whole of that mountain and all of the kind of special effects at the mountain were a huge visual aid to say, God is so holy and you are so sinful, you can't come

near.

Actually, that's the sum total of the whole of the Jewish approach to God. God is so holy and you are so sinful, you can't come near. The closer you get to him, the further away you realise you are. You can't come near. Well, now let's look at what he says in verse 22 and following about the place that we come to, which is so much better than that.

Verses 22 to 24 are about what it's like for the Christian. When we were converted right from that moment, the main thing he says is, you've now got bold access to the throne of grace.

[16:38] See, when we Christians try to come near to God, look what he says. We come right into heaven, to God's own city. The place is full, end of verse 22, full of angels, God's messenger boys.

There are loads of them, more than you could count. Verse 23, all the churches there, all the believers of every age, including the great named people of the Old Testament, the heroes from church history, Christians who've been influential to you, they're all there.

And God himself is there as well, right at the centre, the judge of all. We've come to the very heart of the universe, to where he is. Just think of it, will you?

Sinners like us, in the same city as the judge of all. And instead of there being distance from him, there is now nearness to him.

How on earth could that be possible? Because also, look down again to this passage, verse 24, Jesus is there. The mediator, or the person brokering the deal of this better agreement.

[17:51] He is there, and he's got sprinkled blood with him. Now, the blood of Abel that gets mentioned at the end of that verse, that called out for justice.

Do you remember how Abel was murdered by his older brother? And God said to Cain, Abel's blood is now crying out to me from the ground. Presumably saying something like, please will you do something about the person who done me in.

Will you do something about the guilty people? Jesus' blood, verse 24, speaks to God as well, but it's saying something much better.

Presumably it's saying something like, I've done everything that is needed for this Christian and his crimes. I've been punished so he doesn't need to be.

That's what the blood of Jesus says. So that is how you and I, verse 22, can come to the city of the living God. Because Jesus' blood is shouting out, speaking out for us, saying, yeah, you can let this one in.

[18:59] Yeah, he can come in. Right now, we can saunter right in, right into the holy presence of the terrifying judge of all.

We don't come to a shaky mountain that says, stay right back, stay well away if you want to survive. But we come to the mountain city where God really is.

Where the death of Jesus calls out to us, come in, please come in. Won't you come in and join us and welcome? Now, here's my question.

Why does this bit come here? When we're being told to endure, to keep going to the very end, until we get to the destination of God's heaven, why do we get this comparison in verses 18 to 24?

You've not come to, but you have come to. How does that fit in with endure? So here's my theory. Hold on to your seats because this is amazing. Hebrews is saying, keep going to the very end.

[20:06] This bit is saying, you've already got to the destination. Because you've arrived at the heavenly city. When you became a Christian, verse 22, you have come already.

You're already there. Here's the point. You're already there, and that's why you must endure until you get there. Let me just say that again.

You're already there, and that's why you must endure until you get there. Huh? So here's an illustration. I don't know where this works. Let me try this on you.

Imagine you're going on your summer holidays. You're hanging on for it. You're clinging on for that last week at work before Friday when work finishes and it's summer holidays time.

So you travel home weary on the Friday evening, and you're due to leave for the West Country on Monday morning. And imagine I see you over the weekend, and I say to you, are you on holiday yet?

[21:10] And you'll say, yeah, yeah, I finished work yesterday. I'm on holiday now. So I say to you, when are you going on holiday? And you say, on Monday. Are you on holiday?

Yes. Are you still to go on holiday? Yes. Has the Christian got there? Yes, already. I reached the destination God intended for me when I became a Christian.

That's when I was allowed to come so close to God, to draw near to his throne of grace, so I don't need to stay away in order to survive. Yes, verse 22, we have come to the heavenly city where God is.

But until we get there, until we arrive in heaven, that unseen future, we've got to keep going. I must strive. I must run with endurance.

I must not grow weary or faint-hearted. Have I arrived? Yes, I have. Is there some future arrival towards which I must endure?

[22 : 12] Yes, there is. So I make every effort to come home then by coming home today, by coming to him today.

See, if I'm not being a believer today, what makes me think I'm going to be a believer tomorrow? I was thinking this morning as I was walking here, knowing that I was going to speak about enduring, and it just hit me again.

This is amazing. I can come right into the presence of the scary judge of all at this moment. That's why I must endure until I finally get there.

Second reason, then, why endure? Here it comes. How much less will we escape if we reject his warnings?

I don't know if you've ever had anybody say to you something like this, that the God of the Old Testament, he's very angry and judgmental, isn't he?

[23 : 19] I prefer the God of the New Testament, the loving God. That's what President Bartlett says in the West Wing. You know, I'm more of a New Testament man myself.

I was at a day conference a little while ago, and there was a question from the floor at this day conference, and it, almost quoting from this passage, it said, But of course, we don't come to the God of Mount Sinai, who's a fire and a storm and a trumpet and frightening.

As Christians, we're not meant to fear God, are we? That's not what this passage says. Look at the very last verse. Our God is a consuming fire.

That's our God, the New Testament God, the Christian God. Not different. The God we come to is no different God, no lesser God, than the one who is very, very scary at Mount Sinai.

It's just as frightening. The thing that's changed is that we can get close to him. Amazingly, we can draw near to the scary God. That's what's changed.

[24 : 25] Not that he's become less scary. But if you look at verses 25 to 27, which are quite confusing, we'll go through them in just a minute, but the comparison those verses are making, the comparison between then and now is, if anything, that things are worse.

For the Christian, the privilege of drawing near to God is better. But the warning of punishment if we reject him is worse.

See, look down to verse 25. See to it that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they, in the Old Testament, gathering at Mount Sinai, 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 us from heaven.

See, don't reject the God who speaks to us. In the wilderness, Israel, with this root of bitterness thing, they heard the words of God's sworn covenant and thought stubbornly, I don't need to do what God's commanded.

In the home of Isaac, Esau had the promise of his father's blessing and thought, oh, stuff that, all that future stuff, all that pie in the sky when dad dies.

[25 : 46] I want things now. And the Christian who will not endure is just the same. We hear what God says. We take account of what God promises.

And at the end of verse 25, we then reject him who speaks. You thought Mount Sinai shaking was bad? Hey, that was just the earth.

Beginning of verse 26. At that time, his voice shook the earth. But when God winds up history, when Jesus returns to be the judge of all, everything will be shaken.

Earth, heaven, the whole caboodle. Shaken, not stirred. Upturn, so it's all the right way up again. And in the midst of all that upheaval, God will establish a shake-proof, a shatter-proof, an earthquake-proof kingdom.

A heavenly city. And that's why we endure to the end, because we want to be part of the kingdom that will endure. And this passage warns us.

[26 : 53] If we ignore what is being said here. If we give up as Christians before the end. If we reject him who warns, then we'll be right in the path of...

Have you seen all those photos that have been in the last little while about lava coming out of volcanoes? We will be right in the last little while about the volcano of God's wrath.

See, this is a fire alarm here. Heed it. Things will be much worse for us if we ignore it. How much less will we escape if we reject his warnings?

So that's chapter 12. It tells us to endure, to continue being a Christian to the very end. And two reasons why we should.

Because the place to which we come is so much better. And the warnings of what we must try to escape are so serious. Endure to the very end.

[28 : 00] As I finish, let me just tell you about my mum. She is 97. Most of her life has been spent married to my dad, who died 10 years ago.

My dad was a children's evangelist. And my mum devoted nearly all of her life to serving alongside him. Faithful Christian service in Christian evangelism.

I was talking not long ago to my daughter about my mum. My daughter's granny. And my daughter was saying, we really should be praying for granny to endure to the end.

It almost seems disrespectful to think in that way about my mum. Almost rude. Almost rude. She's lived such a faithful life for so long.

But my daughter is right, isn't it? How awful it would be if my mum drifted off. Stopped being a Christian. Just before she reaches her river Jordan.

[29 : 03] Wouldn't that be awful? Wouldn't it be terrible if she wandered away from her Appalachian Trail because there's some equivalent of lentil stew.

Some daisies growing on the side that she fancies picking. Endure to the very end. Endure to the very end. Aut■■■ kit.