

The Discipline of Watching

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[0 : 0 0] my wife, obviously my wife. Before I got married, I bought a house at Hornsby Heights. It's a little weatherboard house near the Birara Valley National Park.

And if you look at the next slide, the house was lined with about 10 to 15 meter tall trees. It's a bit of a nightmare, actually. It's all along the back fence and along the side fence up to the main road. As you can see, they've turned it way too close together. And you can see some of them, they don't even have leave from them properly. They're full of dead branches. So imagine if there was a bushfire at the nature reserve and the embers blew from the National Park to this wall of trees. What would happen? The mess of dry wood would just act as fuel for the fire. It would burn all the way along the back fence up the driveway and to my house.

There would be a disaster waiting to happen. So I took up the following public service announcement to combat the threat of bushfire. Be alert, but not alarmed. So this catchphrase has been used in many public service relation campaigns, maybe from counterterrorism to bushfire safety.

[1 : 1 4] So in order to apply this campaign properly, I needed to prepare my house. So with the council's permission, I cut down on those trees and to help to combat the threat of bushfire.

So let's think about the consequence of not heeding that advice of be alert, not alarmed. So if I'm not alert, obviously I won't be alarmed. So I wouldn't have prepared my house for the threat of bushfire.

There would have been a serious stretch of the house burning down. But however, if I lived in a constant state of being alarmed, I would have a nervous breakdown or be constantly anxious. The Bible was full of warnings of dangers around us. There's a devil. We are told to watch out for temptation around us and be on guard against being deceived by sin.

Are we alert and not anxious when it comes to watching out for attacks? Do we even know what to do when an attack happens? Today's topic is the discipline of watching.

[2 : 1 7] I want to look at how we can appropriately be alert and not be alarmed when we watch against sin and the devil. And also in light of the topic, the discipline of grace, how do we use the means of grace provided by God to combat those two things?

So I'll focus mainly on two passages. If it helps you fold your outline in half, but you can't fold your app, that's okay, you can take notes in there. You can write the note from Hebrews on one side and 1 Peter on the other side.

So let us pray to get God's help so we can understand this topic. Dear God, we know that we are so easily deceived by sin and the devil. Pray that you can help us to know your means of being equipped to combat that.

We thank you that we can do so through your word. Pray that I will speak clearly and that we will listen to you so that we will be attentive to change for your sake. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. So what sort of threats from sin and the devil should we watch out for? The first attack from sin is that sin is deceptive.

[3 : 2 9] We'll read again from Hebrews chapter 3, verses 12 to 13. See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you have a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. So what does it mean for sin to be deceptive?

So I'll illustrate that with my health or the lack thereof. Around the start of the year, I twisted my back. So for those who were around, it was like around Lunar New Year.

I was walking sort of really lopsided. I went to the doctor. He prescribed a set of back exercises for me to do and told me to go back to check up once in a while.

Now, being a classic male, I'm too stubborn and lazy and busy to go to do those exercises. I wanted a quick fix. I said, I'll just put a bit of photobium on it.

[4 : 29] It should be fine. I said, it's not that bad. I'll just stretch it out. It should be okay. Likewise, spiritually, sometimes we think that we are strong enough and healthy enough to deal with sin.

And it's deceived when we are entangled by sin. I'll give you a few examples. Sometimes we discount the seriousness of sin. Some might think lying isn't a big deal.

That's why it's called a white lie, right? It's not that serious. Sometimes we compare ourselves with other people around the world instead of what is in the Bible. For example, it doesn't matter if we stream live sports from certain websites.

Everyone else is doing it. It's not stealing. It's okay. And at times, we justify our sin in periods of stress. We call anger. We're just blowing off some steam.

And greed and materialism, a bit of retail therapy. Another more subtle way that sin deceives us is that if we are caught in a pattern of sin, we despair and think that God can't possibly help us or love us because we sin repeatedly.

[5 : 40] And when someone asks us how we are going, no matter which way we are deceived, we pretend everything is fine, everything is okay. So these are just some of the many ways that sin deceives us.

So in the same passage, we'll go back to that, the writer warns us about the long-term effect of being deceived by sin as hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

So what does it mean to be hardened? That's actually a pretty important point to clarify. As Christians, we are often deceived by sin. So what's the difference between being deceived once in a while and being hardened in the heart?

So I'll use the doctor analogy a bit further. So let's say if the doctor is giving me advice for checkups, I have to go back to him. If it became too annoying, I treated it as nagging, I found him too annoying, I would start ignoring his advice.

But let's imagine the following. If I think the doctor is basically a scammer trying to get me to repeat my visit, to rip off Medicare, then I would doubt his character.

[6 : 53] I wouldn't go back to him. I would just stop seeing him altogether. In a similar way, these are the ways that we are hardened against God. Sometimes we think of the promises and commands of the Bible, sometimes even the Gospel.

It's repetitive. And we become a bit blasé about listening to God's Word. In a more serious form, sometimes we believe that sin is more attractive than the promises of God.

And we doubt the intentions and the character of God. So let's look at the second attack from the devil. We'll go to 1 Peter 5, verse 8.

Now the devil prowls like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. So what this means is that the devil is actively looking for ways to snatch us away from God.

So usually there are two ways that we are sort of oblivious to the attack of the devil. So the more usual way is that we don't think that the devil exists, or if he does, he doesn't really do much these days.

[8 : 04] The reason is that for most of us, we believe the world is purely material. We don't encounter animism or evil spirits. So what we think often is that sin is truly something that we can control by our will.

That is, we think that the only factor that affects whether I sin is whether I'm using my own willpower to stop it. On the flip side, some people give the devil too much power.

As if God and the devil is in a daily cosmic arm wrestle. And is in constant fear of demonic powers influencing their everyday life.

So you can actually see that in sort of animism and shamanism in many parts of the world, like Africa. So how are we to defend the attacks from sin and the devil?

So God has given us quite a few means to be prepared. So I'm glad that these are left up there. So the first way is God's word. God's word.

[9 : 12] In Hebrews 4, 11 to 13, we can see that God's word is the very means he has used to battle against the threat of sin. So notice in the second part of the verse from chapter 4, verse 11, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joint and marrow.

It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. So most of us think that God's word, to apply it, it means to change our actions, right? In some way, that's good.

We need to change when we read God's word. But we only change our actions with just changing the external stuff. It's like the double-edged sword hitting the external bits of the body. But the word of God does more than that.

It cuts to the heart. That's actually exactly the problem we have, as we read from the bits before in our passage. The problem of sin is not that we have the wrong action, but a dull and unbelieving heart towards God.

The reason why the word of God is a means of grace is that it's actually a means for us to be saved. So if we go back one verse to Hebrews 4.11, it says, Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following the example of disobedience.

[10:30] So in context, if you read the next verse, which is verse 12, the writer gives us the answer, which is God's word. God's word is able to help us to have some salvation to enter the rest of God, the promises of God.

The second preparation we have is to rely on what Jesus has done, the priest and perfect example. So in Hebrews 4.14-16, let's have a look why we should fix our eyes on Jesus and rely on him.

The first way you set Jesus is our priest, the person that acts as an agent between a sinful man and the holy God. His death on the cross has enabled us to approach God with confidence.

You can see the confidence in verse 16. Let us approach with great confidence. Why can we be confident? The reason is that a Christian relies on the perfect work of Jesus, not the works that we have done.

And hence, Jesus has the credentials to speak on behalf of us. That's how he acts as a priest. And Jesus also acts as an example. If we go to verse 15, we see that he can empathize with our weakness.

[11:47] And also, Jesus has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin. Jesus is an example of how we can overcome sin.

If we look at his life in the Garden of Gethsemane, or during his temptation in the desert, he uses God's word. It is his belief in God's word that made him overcome the devil.

A third way that we can achieve a victory is in other aspects of Jesus' life. Jesus is the shepherd. So we go back to 1 Peter.

We can see how the devil is prowling around like the lion. So whether we are oblivious to the devil's attack, or we give them too much power, the answer is the same.

We need to not look at the lion, but the shepherd. What we often forget is that Jesus has already driven away the lion. He has already defeated the devil on the cross.

[12:49] If we rely on the victory of Jesus in our daily struggle against sin, then we will be able to resist. That's why we go a couple of verses down in verse 10.

It says, For those who have resisted, Jesus can restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast. So having looked at the sins, the attack from sin and the devil, and the means that we can have victory, let's see how we can be prepared.

So I want to separate sort of two aspects of being prepared. The goal of being prepared and the means which we get prepared. I'll give you an example of what I mean.

So the first thing we looked at was God's word. If God's victory is achieved through the power of his word, the application is to read the Bible, right?

I'm going to say no and don't condemn me to be a heretic right now. So hear me out. The way that we are prepared is to listen to God's word.

[13:58] And listening is a little bit different from reading. So there are a few different aspects of listening. So if we only read the Bible as a habit or something to tick off in our boxes, that doesn't actually achieve the goal of listening.

It's just a habit to tick a box. If we read the Bible for information, that's only going to build our knowledge. And we're not even reading the Bible to transform our behavior.

As good as that sounds, in the worst form, if we just read to change our behavior, we might be tempted to rely on our behavior rather than Jesus to prepare against the sin and the devil.

So how are we to read the Bible? We need to read the Bible and listen in a way that's for our hearts. To understand the words on the page of the Bible or in your app, it's not a daily habit you tick off or a guide to life, but it's actually the word of God.

God is speaking to us through his word. The aim of reading is to listen to who God is. That's why we need to pray before we read the Bible.

[15 : 11] We want the Holy Spirit to help us to recognize that the words are actually God's words. And then through knowing God, can we keep believing in him? And only in this way, we won't harden our hearts and we'll be able to correctly prepare ourselves and resist the deception of sin.

So the implication of this is pretty big. So I want to ask you a question. When you read the Bible, do you recognize that it's actually God speaking to you?

If the answer is no, I would love for you to fill in a card. Don't be shy if no one else is grabbing it. Just grab it and fill out a card saying, I would like some help to know how to read the Bible so that I can recognize that it's God speaking to me.

And I would love to help you to do this. I'm the missions pastor, but I'm really glad that I can help you if you want to do this. Fill it in, I'll let you read the Bible with me. I'd actually want to love to ask you to ask each other after the service.

What would it take in terms of time or environment, routine, patterns, for us to read in such a way that we are listening to God from the Bible?

[16 : 29] So this actually sets ways into the second thing that we need to be prepared for is that we need to encourage each other, have people around us to encourage each other.

We'll go to Hebrews 3 and look at what it means to encourage each other. 3.13 But encourage one another daily as long as it is called today so that none of you is deceived by sin's deceitfulness.

So, you can see from this verse, on this side of heaven, we need to encourage each other every day. So the implication of this is that the health of the church is not measured by how many people attend church or in our small groups, but whether we actually come together with the aim of encouraging each other.

And encouragement isn't just the slap on the back like you're going well, hollow encouragement, not hollow compliments. In this passage, the type of encouragement we need is a type that will help us to not be deceived by sin.

You think of the nature of deception, no one knows that they are deceived. Otherwise, you won't be right. You'll figure it out yourself. So in order for other people to help us not to be deceived, we really need the value of humble authenticity.

[17 : 58] The reason why we need that is that we need to let other people point out the instances when we are deceived. And, on the flip side, we need to be humble and courageous to approach other people to point out when they are being deceived.

even at the cost of friction during the relationship. So the other thing that it means is if the goal is encouragement, not attendance, we'd love for you to keep going to church, but it's a really deep way of relating to each other.

is that we, even when we are sick or we have unavoidable situations, we'll make efforts to encourage each other. So, I'll give an example of how this works.

I'm in a Sunday morning community group led by Adam Ma. So, there are many young parents in that group and you know with young parents in winter, what happens is that a lot of the people in the group get sick and sometimes some people have work trips, got a couple of mothers that are expecting.

So, for all various reasons, not all of us can attend every week. But we still aim to encourage each other by having a WhatsApp group. So, we can actually send messages to each other to keep each other accountable and encourage each other in that way.

[19 : 27] So that even when we can't see each other, we have the intention to help each other to grow. We can also apply this to the way that we meet at church.

So, if we are keen to encourage each other, then we would love to stay behind. We won't duck out after the service. And I think the afternoon service does a great job at staying right here and talking with each other.

We actually want to get to know each other and not just have a superficial greeting, but we will be eager to help one another if we see someone going off track because of sin's deception.

That's why all these events in the last couple of months have been so helpful. I hope that through all these events, we have gotten to know each other a bit better, but more than that, once there's a relationship, we can get into the task of encouraging each other.

And if for any reason that you have felt that you've been on the outside of the church, not really getting into the group, whether you find it hard to share your situation, maybe due to language or life circumstances, this passage is for you.

[20 : 39] We would actually, all of us would love to be in community with you because, as we can see from the Bible, it's so easy to be deceived by sin. So I would encourage you to sign up to community group afterwards, we'll bring the iPads around, and stay behind at church and meet us.

So in the morning service, and probably in the afternoon as well, we've got a roughly half and half split between Anglo-Australians and people from other backgrounds. So my hope is that we'll have a similar split in our community group.

Right now, we don't have that at the moment. So we actually really do want all of us to sign up. The third way we get prepared is how we relate in light of Christ being our shepherd.

So we go to 1 Peter now. In 1 Peter chapter 5, verse 2, we can see the elders, the leaders of the church, are to lead in light of Christ's suffering as a shepherd.

So just as Christ as a shepherd, the leaders are to lead and have oversight of the church or the flock as shepherds. so some people from probably a more eastern culture might take that to mean for all the pastors to take care of each person in the congregation.

[22 : 02] But how we do things here is that the biblical command is for oversight, to have oversight of the entire church. And the way that we do this is that we want everyone to have an opportunity to be cared for.

So the way we organize things is that we have got a group of community group leaders. And not all of them are in full-time ministry. In fact, most of them aren't. But the group leaders are to act as mini-shepherds.

So we've got more people taking care of everyone. And that way we can actually connect, care, and grow with God and one another. The pastoral staff and Paul Fitzpatrick, the community group director, has taken on the task of discipling and coaching these leaders.

So we can actually do the task of oversight well, so we can take care of everyone. So notice in this structure, it's not about how old you are, or how long you've been at church, or what status you have.

That determines who is leading, but the role is assigned. So in the Sunday group, for example, Adam Ma is leading. I'm the mission pastor at church, but in that group, he's the leader.

[23 : 17] I gladly submit to him, and I gladly support him in the Sunday group, so that he can help all the other members to take care of each other and to grow. So I want to go back, now that we've looked at the means that we can get prepared and equip ourselves against the attack of the devil, I want to go back to the picture of the house that I used to live in.

And if you have to imagine your spiritual state as that house, all would be like, are you currently not alert to the work of sin and the devil, a little bit like a house surrounded by all these tall dead trees, in the constant danger of trees getting, waiting to catch fire?

or are you too alarmed and anxious to trust God and rely on the gracious means that is provided through his word or the people around him?

Or are you rightly armed by God's means to be alert and not alarmed? May God help us to use these means to do so.