

Hebrews 12:12-17

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[0 : 00] I don't know if you noticed this week, I think it was this week, might have been last week, I'm not a particularly careful watcher of it, but it was His Royal Highness Prince George of Cambridge's first birthday this week, and there was a bit of a hoopla across the pond, as they say over there, and maybe you do too, it was a celebration of this little boy.

I was reflecting on him because I was thinking, man, as a one-year-old, what a life he has in front of him. He is the great-grandson of the queen, the grandson, yes, the great-grandson of the queen. One day he will be a king. He will grow up as royalty. He will grow up as a son of the king one day, most likely, and he has a path that's set before him. In living out this great privilege and this great honor that he has, his life will be marked by certain particular ways in which he will have to grow up, be trained, things that he will have to pursue in order to live out the life that he has been given because of his birth. No doubt, challenges will abound.

He will have to grow up in manners and in protocol in ways that we never will, and I'm sure as a young child he will find that difficult. Certainly his, both his father and even more famously his uncle, struggled to live out the youthful calling to be the son of a king. And even today, if you read the tabloids, it's still a struggle sometimes, isn't it? To live out this calling and to be who they are called to be because of their birth. He will need training. He will need discipline. He will forsake living a normal life to pursue this particular life that he has been given. And it will give him a focus of his life that will either be a crushing burden or a great joy.

Friends, this morning we are going to look at Hebrews. We're continuing in our series in Hebrews chapter 12. Hebrews chapter 12. And what I want you to see this morning is that just like His Royal Highness Prince George of Cambridge, for all who are in Christ, there is now a calling, a birthright, a future set before us.

Hebrews is picturing it athletically as a race to run, which is also a helpful picture, like a marathoner, to actually be able to compete at the highest levels.

[3 : 32] To have discipline and training and focus about what we are doing and how we are going to pursue it. Hebrews brings these themes together in our passage this morning.

And it raises a question for us, for all who are in Christ. How do we run the race set before us as children of the King, as beloved sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father?

This is the question that our passage puts before us this morning. So if you want to turn with me to Hebrews chapter 12. That's on page 1,000 and, oh, I forget to look at this every week.

9, 10, 11, something like that. Is that right? Yeah? Okay. Hebrews chapter 12. We're going to be looking at verses 12 through 17.

So if you want to turn there with me. And as you're turning there, I want you to see the flow of thought in chapter 12. Because if you remember, chapter 12 begins with this majestic statement that's so famous and well-known.

[4 : 45] Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run the race set before us, laying aside the entanglements and the sin. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.

Let us look to Him, the author 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 God.

So this is the beginning. Therefore, let us run this race. But then He shifts gears almost immediately. And in verses 4 through 11, He answers a question that many of us ask.

If we are indeed children of God, if we are indeed in Christ, and Christ has done all of these things for us, why is it so hard?

Why has God not made it easy? And if you remember, if you were here last week, or if you look through verses 4 through 11, the answer that He gives is, it is not easy because God loves you.

[5 : 50] And the things that are hard, the trials that you are facing right now, are not signs of God's abandonment or lack of care for you.

Indeed, they are signs that He loves you. Because every father loves his children by training them and disciplining them so that they might know more of what is right and good.

So that in this context, we may know God and His ways more and more and live in the birthright that He's given us. And this is the context that leads us to our passages this morning.

Hebrews 12, 12. Let's read it together. Therefore, therefore, because we have this race to run, therefore, because God loves us, and so this race will not be easy, 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.

Strive for peace with everyone and for the holiness without which no one will see God. 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.

[7 : 32] For you know that afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

Let's pray together. Lord, we ask this morning that your word would speak to us.

Lord, enlighten our minds, encourage our hearts, Lord, refresh our souls. Lord, we pray this morning that you would give us endurance to run the race set before us.

God, that we would not give up, but that we would press on. Lord, help us to see your grace that enables us to do it.

Lord, I pray you would help me to speak clearly, and I pray that as we all sit under your word this morning, that you would speak to us. We pray this in Jesus' name.

[8 : 39] Amen. Today, we'll look at what it looks like to run the race of God, and to run the race as a child of God, and we will see in our passage three things.

If you're taking notes, these are your three things to hang your notes on. The first thing is there is going, there's going to be a description of the path to run. The second one is about the pitfalls to avoid, and our third point will be the provision to endure as we run this race.

So let's look at these in order. First, there is a path to run. Look with me again at verses 12 through 14. Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees and make straight your path so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

The rite of Hebrews picks up an evocative image, and it's probably not hard for you to think if you watch the World Cup. Think about the guys running the field at the 118th minute of overtime.

When the ball goes out of bounds, they all bend over, put their hands on their knees. Basketball, they call it, hanging on their shorts because they're so tired, they can barely stand up.

[10 : 00] Or if you're a runner, think of the toil of those running the Boston Marathon, hitting that 20-mile mark and hitting Heartbreak Hill, that long incline.

And think of the image of an exhausted runner struggling, striving, drooping hands and weak knees, wondering, can I ever make it up this hill?

This image is not original to the writer of Hebrews. If you listen carefully to the passage earlier in Isaiah that we read, there Isaiah was encouraging his people in the midst of great trial and tribulation, in the midst of great calamity.

He's encouraging them, don't give up, for your God will come and save you. The imagery continues in verse 12, or in verse 13.

He says, make straight your path. And I was thinking about this. What is he talking about? There's another place, again in Isaiah, remember Isaiah 6? I think, no, Isaiah 9.

[11 : 18] Every valley will be lifted up and every mountain will be made low so that the way of the kingdom, and it has this sense of the paths will be straight because they're going to be easy. And when I first read this, I thought, oh, that's what this is about.

But you know, I read this more and I don't think that's actually what it's about. It's about having the right path. I don't know if you're ever a cross-country runner. I wasn't, but my cousin, or my nephew was visiting this week.

He was telling me stories about running cross-country. And, you know, a lot of cross-country routes run through the woods. You know, he was telling me about reading a copperhead on there. He's from South Carolina.

It's a great adventure for him. But when you're running through the woods, right, you want to stay on the path because if you stray off the path, how much harder is it to run?

How much more difficult is it to run? And particularly when, as the writer points out, when you're already lame, right, he's assuming that we are all lame, that we all have particular weaknesses of our joints or of our muscles where we're struggling to keep going.

[12:29] And when we make it that much harder, when we have to fight through the underbrush and when we can't see the hidden pitfalls under the leaves, when we hit those things, what happens?

We get thrown out of joint altogether. We dislocate. It's the best translation of that word. He says, that's why you need to run straight on the path because when you run straight on the path, even those places where you are weak with a straight path heading to the right goal, you will actually find not greater harm but healing.

So the writer of Hebrews picks up these two images about running, about running the race and how do we do it leading up to verse 14 where he makes clear what is he talking about here?

What is he getting at? So look with me at verse 14 again. He says, strive for peace with everyone and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

A couple of observations here. The writer is saying, do you remember? The goal is God. The goal is that you can have fellowship with God. Remember the writer of Hebrews way back in chapter 10.

[13:49] Now that Christ has entered into the holy place, now you can draw near to God. And he has assumed that this is a precious and beautiful thing that we all want, that we want to be with God.

The writer of Hebrews says, in order to do that, we must strive for peace and holiness. The picture of striving, it's again an evocative word that has a picture of like bloodhounds on the chase.

There's a single sense and a single goal and they're pursuing it over and over and over again. Or again, like a marathon runner who has one goal in running the race, to finish, to reach the finish line, to not give up.

And so we are to pursue this calling of reaching to God and actually drawing near to Him. And he says, how do we do that? How do we lift up our drooping hands?

How do we make straight our paths? We do it by pursuing peace and holiness. Now, the writer of Hebrews has reminded us earlier, peace is what comes when we are rightly related to God.

[15:10] It is a gift that God gives us where the wrath against sin that God has, the wrath that God has against evil in the world and injustice and unrighteousness that is both in the world out there but also in our hearts, the wrath against us is removed because of Christ.

And so we have peace with God. And then that peace then allows us to live a life not of struggling and striving against one another but of running together this race.

And don't forget, friends, that this race is being run for the Hebrews, for the audience that he's writing to. It's happening in the context of persecution.

Do you remember chapter 10? You suffered these things and you did so gladly and with joy.

They've already seen persecution and it seems that the fear of more persecution is on the horizon.

Let me ask you this. When life gets really hard, how easy is it to be peaceful with those around you?

Right? When your stress level rises, when fear begins to creep into your heart, when doubt about God's love for you and His goodness for you begin to control your heart, what do you do?

[16:40] I know what I do. I get really selfish. My life becomes about me and my agendas and my taking care of myself.

And you know what it always does? It makes me short with my kids. It makes me difficult with my wife. It makes me critical of the others around me.

It makes me hard to work with in the office. It is hard to pursue peace in the midst of trial.

The author of Hebrews is telling us that we need to keep going because this peace is something that God has given us in Christ. And because we have it from Him, we are able to, even in the midst of trial, pursue it.

Not only that, he says to pursue holiness. Now, I have to admit, this feels like it comes out of the blue in the writer, almost. Verse 4 of chapter 12 mentions in your struggle against sin, you have not gotten to the point of shedding blood.

[18:00] But we haven't seen a lot in the book of Hebrews up to this point about how to live a holy life that is a life set apart for God, a life that pursues His righteousness, that submits all that we are

and all that we do to God's control and God's instruction and God's direction.

But again, it made sense to me when I started to think of what is it like to run a race when it's really hard? And again, when you're facing trials, when you're facing immense pressures, maybe you've experienced what I've experienced and that is that the temptation to forsake a pursuit of holiness is really easy.

I'm just so tired. I don't have the energy to do the right thing. Or sometimes it's I feel so beat up. Can't I just get something to make my life a little easier? A little snack from the fridge? A little click on the link? A little bit of juicy gossip dropped in a phone conversation?

A little cutting corners? My taxes? Whatever it is. All these little things that just alleviate our pressure a little bit or give us this little moment of joy?

[19 : 34] But that's not holiness, is it? And when we're tired, it's hard to pursue holiness. But friends, the writer of Hebrews wants us to remember.

Chapter 10, we'll look at us. Go back and look at it again sometime. Chapter 10, verse 10 and 14. Christ has cleansed our consciences. He has purified our hearts so that we are able to pursue righteousness.

So that we are able to pursue holiness rightly. Friends, this is the challenge that Prince George will face as he grows up.

Will he stay on the track of living out of who he is? Friends, that's how holiness is.

Holiness is saying, I'm a child of God. I have been brought into his kingdom. I have been named an heir of the kingdom of God. I'm a member of his family. Now I need to live like it.

[20 : 44] And just like Prince George, it will make us different from the world around us. It will mean we will not do things that the world will do.

It will mean we will do things that others will seem to think is crazy or odd. But as we pursue this, it is this that perpetuates our drawing near to God.

Our holiness is a part of our drawing near to God as our Heavenly Father who loves us. As we allow him to instruct and shape our lives.

So this is how we're to run the race. To not give up the foot of Heartbreak Hill, but to strengthen our limbs by seeing God.

And knowing that the goal is worth it. And making the path straight. And pursuing peace and holiness. This is what the writer of the Hebrews encourages us to do.

[22 : 03] Friends, it's easy for us to grow weary. It's easy for us to want comfort and ease in the moment rather than the finish line and the goal that's set before us.

God wants us to run with form. God-shaped form. Godliness shaped form. As we run before it. We have to forsake the selfishness that so easily creeps in in the face of trial and temptation. What does this look like? I was thinking through some of the great Christian biographies that I love to read.

Helen was a missionary to Africa in the middle of the 20th century. She was a missionary through the transition from the colonial period and suffered deeply for her commitment to stay with her church and with her ministry as the battle line swept over their location again and again.

She, in fact, in the face of great pressure, did one of the most remarkable things, one of the most remarkable ways of pursuing peace with others.

[23 : 32] she gave herself in place of some young Catholic nuns who were about to be assaulted by the rebel soldiers as they swept through.

She saw in that moment an opportunity not to turn inward on herself and just try to protect herself through it, but to actually give herself for the sake of others.

She ran the race at a great cost to herself and suffered deeply for it, and yet, as she wrote about it in hindsight, she said, God gave me this privilege to be his daughter in that moment, to have a fellowship with my Lord that could not come if I had turned away from it, you all probably know the story of Eric Little, the English runner in the beginning of the 20th century, 1922 Olympics, he said that he would not run on Sabbath by conviction.

The preliminaries for his favored race was that day, but he lived as his son set apart. It's a great movie, Chariots of Fire, if you want to see his story, and I think him fairly well represented in it.

He did not live to please anyone, he did not live to please himself, he lived to please God, no matter what the cost. He didn't run in his favorite race.

[25 : 24] He never medaled in it. He had other successes, God chose to bless him with that. But as he ran the race, he could see the goal in front of him, and it wasn't a gold medal at the Olympics, and it wasn't world fame, and it wasn't success at the thing that he had invested everything in.

it was that he would be faithful to his God. Having looked at then the path to run, the writer of Hebrews goes on to point out pitfalls for us to avoid.

Look with me at verses 15 through 17. One of the things that's important to see is this whole passage has plural nouns.

It's really hard in our English, you know this, to see you. You in English is both singular and plural. It's easy to think of a lone runner running this race, but in fact, all of the you's in this passage are plural.

And so he's not speaking to an individual per se, but he's speaking to a community saying, run this race that's set before you, and here we see, see to it that you don't fall into these pitfalls before you.

[26 : 44] See to it not just by watching your own life, but by encouraging and strengthening and even challenging one another to run the race.

So he says, see to it that you don't fall into these things. And I think there's a progression in these pitfalls. The first one is don't fall short of the grace of God.

That is, don't fall short of attaining or taking hold of or living in or depending upon the grace of God that God has shown you in Christ.

What is this? Well, if you've been here for the whole year, then you know, because it's what the writer of Hebrews wrote about for chapters and chapters and chapters. But if you're new here, let me try to summarize the richness of this book.

God in Christ has done the amazing work of removing the stain of our sin by offering his son, Jesus Christ, to take that sin and the penalty for it and the stain of it upon himself, dying on the cross in our place so that we might not bear the reproach and the judgment and the wrath of God against that sin, but rather we might know that we are able to draw near to God as sons and daughters of the King because of what Christ has done.

[28 : 16] This is the grace of God. There is nothing that you can do to make yourself acceptable to God, but God has done everything that is necessary in Christ, and you are called simply to receive this by faith and believe it.

And friends, as the Hebrew church knew and as we know, it can be hard to keep going in that grace, to keep clinging to that grace and that truth alone.

Our hearts are so bent to want to do it on our own, and then as we see when life gets really hard, we want to give up.

And so he warns us, don't let go of that. Don't lose sight of what God has done for you in Christ. When you lose sight of that, you've begun to wander from the path.

And then, the next thing that he says is the next step. See to it that a root of bitterness doesn't grow up in your heart. See, friends, when we lose sight of God's goodness to us in Christ, the objective work that God has done for us for all time, then when we face trials, it's really easy for self-pity to rise in our hearts.

[29 : 45] It's really easy to think, God, why are you doing this to me? I don't deserve this. God, this is too hard. I can't do this.

And a root of bitterness begins to grow up in our hearts. We become bitter towards God. God, why couldn't you make this easier?

God, why couldn't you take this away? God, why can't you give me the thing that I really, really want? And bitterness takes root in our heart.

And we can come to church for years and live with this root of bitterness in our heart. And in it, as it says in verse 15, it causes trouble.

Because when we have lost sight of the grace of God and when bitterness and this questioning and this doubting rises up in our hearts, it begins to then affect how we serve in the church, how we have fellowship with one another.

[30 : 50] Suddenly, God is not a delightful one that we come to worship every Sunday. We come and we do it out of duty or out of habit. Our fellowship with one another becomes weak.

Because we can't exhort one another, God is faithful. God has taken hold of you. God will take care of you. Which is what all the book of Hebrews has been about. When the root of bitterness takes hold, we can't do that to one another.

And so not only is your life impoverished, but those around you lack the encouragement that they need. And so we resent the calling to holiness.

We resent the desire to pursue peace in our hearts. And this leads us then to the third thing. Don't be sexually immoral or irreligious.

Do you remember Esau? What did Esau do? Go back and look at the story after church this morning. In Genesis 25, Esau was the older son, the one who had the birthright of being the son of Isaac, which meant that he was the son of the promise, Abraham, Isaac, and it should have been Esau in the normal course of human relationships.

[32 : 21] He had that place because he was first born. And he came home one day and he was hungry and he was tired.

And he looked at his brother who was a farmer and he said, can I have some of your stew? Your lentil stew because you're not a hunter. So it's vegetarian.

And Jacob, seeing the opportunity, said, sell me your birthright. Well, that's kind of shocking. But even more shocking is Esau's response.

Well, without your soup, I'm going to die. So what does it matter? Sure. It's basically what he says.

He says, I'm so hungry and tired, I'm going to die. My birthright is worth nothing.

He despises it. He treats it as cheap. And he gives it away. He didn't see or he had lost sight of how his birthright was connected to the promise to Abraham that God would bless him and his descendants and make his family great and make it a blessing to the whole world.

[33 : 42] Now, interestingly, in Genesis, Moses reminds us of that. Chapter 26, right after this account, God comes to Isaac and reaffirms the covenant to him, reminding us of the foolishness of Esau.

He traded something eternal, something of immeasurable value, the promise and favor of God for a fleeting pleasure, for a bowl of soup.

He lost sight of God. How easy it is, particularly when we are facing trial, when we are facing persecution, when it's costly to continue to run the race.

When we lose sight of God's grace for us in Christ, when we begin to doubt and question God's goodness to us, at that moment, friends, do not deceive yourself.

You are on the edge of exactly where Esau was. It is so easy at that moment to sell your birthright for a pot of soup.

[34 : 59] It is so easy to give up running the race, pursuing peace and holiness for a momentary pleasure.

It might be the pleasure of blowing up at your kids and yelling at them because they've done it again and it just kind of drives you crazy.

And when you lose sight of the grace of God, you take it out on them in anger. The writer of Hebrews is explicit here and he'll pick this up in chapter 13.

But how easily the power of sexual pleasure can grip us in those moments of weakness. Whether it be late night internet pornography, whether it be a late night hanging out with your girlfriend that begins to slip far beyond, whether it be the dalliance of that co-worker across the hall who just seems to be really interested in you.

How easily our hearts wander from the path of holiness and the area of sexual morality. How easily we forsake faithfulness to God, a pursuit of purity for a moment of pleasure.

[36 : 30] And friends, we're never thinking about it as selling our birthright as children of God when we do it. Rarely. Rarely are we thinking about it when we do it.

But the writer of Hebrews wants us to remember that and to see that. Often it's a little thing. At times it's a big thing.

It's a big decision. You've just had it. You've had it with God. You've had it with how hard your life is and you just are ready to chuck the whole thing. I'm going to go find something else to do. Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die.

That actually sounds really good to me today. Why would I want to pursue God if I've lost sight of His grace and if I'm doubting His love?

It's not very valuable to us anymore. And it's easy. It's easy to say I'm just going to pursue this affair.

[37 : 34] I'm going to embezzle the money. I'm going to beat the heck out of this guy who I don't like. Whatever it is we just lose it. And there's a warning.

Verse 17 reminds us of the warning that we've seen throughout Hebrews. There's a warning that when we have walked down this road, when we have put our feet in the steps of these pitfalls, rather than making our paths straight, our hearts are hardened.

Look at it with me because I want you to make sure you get it right. For you know that afterwards when Esau desired to inherit the blessing, which is separate from the birthright, you look at the story, he wanted, he had given up the birthright, but he went, he wanted the blessing from his father.

Jacob snuck in and stole that too. And so he couldn't get either of it. So he was rejected and he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

Friends, he didn't seek repentance with tears. It's not that he couldn't repent in that moment. It's that he sought the blessing and he couldn't repent because his heart was so fixated not on pleasing God, not on the promises of God, but on the momentary value of the blessing from his father.

[39 : 08] And he couldn't turn away from that because he had set his heart on it for so long.

Friends, when we walk in these pitfalls, we need to recognize that we are hardening our heart against the truth of the gospel.

people. But the good news, friends, is that this is in here not because you are a lost cause. If you're feeling that right now, let me state very clearly, you are not a lost cause because it's in here as a warning to you so that you can turn back today.

So that you can say, I don't want to walk in those pitfalls anymore. I want to run the race again. And for all of us this morning, the question is, how do we do that?

Having looked at the path and the pitfalls then, what is God's provision for us? If it was just running a marathon, the coach would be, try harder, do more, train better, focus your mind, you can do this, strive, strive, strive.

But friends, the beauty of the Christian life is that we are meant to strive and we are meant to strive and we are meant to discipline ourselves and we are meant to be careful and we are meant to be focused.

[40 : 38] But we are meant to do that not as the achievement of these things, but as the result of what God has done for us. the key is all the way back in chapter 12, verse 2.

We are to look to Jesus. We must look to Him. Verse 3, we are to consider Him. Why?

Well, friends, because Esau sold his birthright for an easy meal. But Jesus, Jesus had a birthright of greater glory, of greater value.

And you know what? He didn't abandon it even when it meant that He would go to the cross. Jesus is the Son of God and in His calling as the Son of God, He was going to walk the path of condemnation for sinners like you and me.

He embraced that path and said, not my will, but your will be done. And rather than selling His birthright, He embraced it at the cost of His very own life.

[42 : 00] Esau said, what worth is my birthright, I'm going to die. Jesus said, my birthright means I am going to die and I'm going to embrace that. I'm going to make it mine.

And He walked that path and He ran that race for us to win us back, to rescue us.

Jesus has run the race ahead of us. so that we might know God.

So that we might be adopted into His family as sons and daughters. So that we might inherit with Him this birthright of being children of God and drawing near to Him as a loving Heavenly Father who in the midst of the fiercest trials and the deepest persecutions is showing His Father love for us.

Training us to live as His children in this world as we look ahead to the finish line. The finish line when we will know the well done, good, and faithful servant.

[43 : 13] When we will know the embrace of the Father in heaven. When all of our striving against sin will be done when all the powers that stand against God will be overcome.

That's the finish line that we're looking forward to. Jesus ran that race. Hebrews 5.8 reminds us of this.

He learned obedience through suffering. Not because He was imperfect, but because in His perfection as He suffered He affirmed over and over and over again that He would be the obedient Son who would not forsake His birthright for us.

And this is what the Hebrews, the writer of the Hebrews wants us to hear. Brothers, sisters, don't give up your birthright.

Don't lose heart. No matter how hard it is, Christ has run the race before you. He has shown you the way to keep going.

[44 : 24] He is teaching us to run. And yes, it involves the discipline of pursuing holiness, of being set apart, of allowing God's Word to shape everything we do and how we think and what we value.

It is pursuing peace first with God and then with one another at great cost to ourselves, pursuing reconciliation and unity through service and sacrifice.

But friends, we pursue this because we can look to Jesus, because He is not only the author but the perfecter of our faith, because He has run the race before us and He is bringing us with Him into this glory that He has achieved.

Don't give up, friends. Don't give up. Press on to run the race. Let's pray. Jesus, we look to You. Lord, will You capture our hearts this morning. Lord, with the greatness of Your grace to us in Christ, will You affirm again to our hearts the goodness in the midst of trial, in the midst of persecution, in the midst of suffering.

[45 : 53] Lord, that You love us, that You are training us, Lord, to trust in You, to value You and Your kingdom above all other things.

Lord, to wean out our selfishness and our self-pity. Lord, so that we might truly live as Your sons and daughters.

For Your glory, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.