

**Hebrews: the Supremacy of Christ Above all Things**  
*Lift Up Your Drooping Hands*  
Hebrews 12:12-17

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**Text:**

Hebrews 12:7-17 (ESV)

<sup>7</sup> 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? <sup>8</sup> If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. <sup>9</sup> 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? <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> **Therefore** lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, <sup>13</sup> and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. <sup>14</sup> Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. <sup>15</sup> 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; <sup>16</sup> that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. <sup>17</sup> For 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.

**Introduction:**

The all-important word for helping us catch the point of the text this morning is the word “therefore” at the start of v.12.

The Scriptures are full of instances where the writers, especially the NT writers, lay out truth and then upon the knowledge of that truth call for a certain kind of lifestyle. “Know” and “Do” is the NT pattern for Christian living. It is not enough to simply know the truth if you refuse to live out that truth. So the NT calls us to right doctrine and to right living. In fact this distinction is seen clearly in Paul’s writings in the pastorals where he urges Timothy, for example, to “preach and teach” (cf. 1 Tim. 6:2). “What is the difference,” you might ask? Teaching explains the truth so that it might be known and preaching exhorts the hearer to live the kind of life that is in keeping with that knowledge. Hypocrisy is the gross inconsistency of saying one thing and doing another. Is that right? And the grossest kind of hypocrisy is to know the right doctrine and live a life that is out of step with such belief.

After the preacher teaches, he must call for the right kind of action. Teach and exhort is the pattern of any proper sermon. Well, that is exactly what we find here in Hebrews 12. Once a believer knows that God is at work behind his/her suffering; once they know that God is designing their pain and turmoil for discipline; once they know that God is not bringing pain because he is angry but because he loves us as sons, there is a kind of lifestyle that must be exhorted.

- “Since it is for discipline that you must endure...” (v.7)
- “Since it is God treating you as a loved son that you suffer...” (v.8)
- “Since it is God’s design for you to share in his holiness through suffering...” (v.10)

- “Since it is for you eternal good that God disciplines you...” (v.10)
- “Since God’s discipline only seems painful when it is really pleasant...” (v.11)
- “Since God’s discipline yields a peaceful fruit of righteousness to those trained by it...” (v.11)
- “And, since we know that you are growing weary and fainthearted in your struggle...” (v.3)
- “Therefore, lift up your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees.

Do you hear the exhortation?

Do you hear the theology?

Let’s take the second one first! There is a profound truth behind this kind of structure.

Thesis: We obey the commands because God is at work.

All of these commands for us to do something are rooted in something God is already doing for us and in us. So just like chapter 11 taught us, we are to do these things "by faith" - that is, with the assurance that God is for us and is working for those who trust him. We are not being commanded here in this text to do things that will get God to adopt us as his children. We are being commanded to act like people who are utterly persuaded that we are already adopted through faith, and that our omnipotent Father loves us, and that the most painful adversities of our lives are expressions of his loving discipline and not his angry punishment.

In other words, you can obey these commands coming in v.12f only because God is already at work behind the scenes. That's what the "therefore" means at the beginning of verse 12: God is ruling over the lives of his people. The persecution and sickness and adversity we endure are part of God's sovereign design for our good and our holiness. Therefore, be strengthened by this truth, and join God in pursuing the holiness he designs, drink in this grace; don't throw away your birthright as a child of God by saying, "If that's the way God is, I'm going back to Egypt" (see 11:25-26).

The point is that in the midst of our pain and struggles God is pouring grace into our lives. Our tendency is to miss it, to refuse it, to choke on it. So the exhortation comes in – “Don’t miss the grace of God.” “Don’t sell-out to some other pleasure like Esau did.”

Here again, we see the prominent themes and options:

- ***Caving-in beneath the pressures that threaten*** – “I just want the pain to go away.” “I can’t do this anymore.” This is the place where feelings are sovereign.
- ***Selling-out to the pleasures that beckon*** – “If this is the way God is, I’m going back to Egypt.” “I deserve to be happy so God will understand if I end this marriage.” “I’m so hungry I think I am about to die. Brother, do you want to trade me that bowl of stew for my birthright?” This too is the place where feelings are sovereign.

Do you hear the need for exhortation? “Don’t cave-in! Don’t sell-out!”

So here come the exhortations. Begin in v.12 and watch. There are seven and maybe, 8 different commands or exhortations.

Hebrews 12:12-17 (ESV)

<sup>12</sup> Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, <sup>13</sup> and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. <sup>14</sup> Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. <sup>15</sup> 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; <sup>16</sup> that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like

Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. <sup>17</sup> For you know [Understand! – “Know that”] 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.

1. Lift up your drooping hands
2. Strengthen your weak knees
3. Make straight paths for your feet
4. Strive for peace with everyone
5. Strive for holiness
6. See to it that no fails to obtain the grace of God
7. See to it that no one is sexually immoral or unholy.
8. Understand the urgency!

Now then, let’s lump them together by category and break them down into three kinds. There are exhortations to persistence, to diligence, and to alertness.

So let’s take these one at a time.

#### **Exhortation to Persistence** (vv.12-13)

<sup>12</sup> Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, <sup>13</sup> and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

Remember that this is all being drawn from the race metaphor that began back in v.1. When someone in a race gets weary, the first sign of fatigue is drooping hands. In fact, I can remember one of the most hated drills in basketball practice was this silly running in place with our hands up. If anyone dropped their hands, our coach would yell, “Lift those hands!” He would blow the whistle and add another minute to the drill. At the end of the season, we would all be yelling amongst ourselves, “Keep up your hands!” The idea was to encourage each other to focus on our hands so that we could get out without penalty. But why would our coach do this to us? Was he mad? Did he hate us? No! He knew that it was a drill to get it into our brains as second nature – he was disciplining us so that in game time, when on defense, we would have our hands up at the end of the game!

The second sign of weariness is weak knees. Anyone who has ever run for longer than a mile knows the burning that starts in the legs. It can be painful!

When a person is running in an Olympic race, for example, when they start to get tired, the tendency is to cheat a little and start to leave his lane. That is the second exhortation: “make straight paths for your feet.” The idea is “Keep in your lane! Don’t cheat and get disqualified!”

The third sign of fatigue is someone who is just flat-out crippled. They cannot go anymore. Their joints are out of socket. As any athlete knows, major injuries come as the result of fatigue. Usually, the guy who is in the best shape is the guy going to the hardest at the end. He is the one most secure from injury.

The exhortation is that we are to keep our hands up, stay in our lanes so that we do not get seriously injured.

His message, however, is not to the weak kneed or drooping hands, but to the whole team. He is writing to the team to tell the team, plural, that it is their job to keep the collective hands raised and their collective knees strong. He is writing to you, plural. IN fact this is made clear when you notice the OT text from which he quotes here. The author’s allusion is taken from Isaiah 35:3-8

Isaiah 35:3-8 (ESV)

<sup>3</sup> Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. <sup>4</sup> 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.” <sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; <sup>6</sup> then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; <sup>7</sup> the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. <sup>8</sup> And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray.

It is clear in both of these contexts that the authors are addressing everyone of Israel, every one of the Hebrews Christians, so that they might look out for each other and go after those with drooping hands and weak knees.

Such exhortations are similar to what we have already seen in Hebrews:

- **Hebrews 10:24-25 (ESV)**

<sup>24</sup> And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

- **Hebrews 3:12-14 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. <sup>14</sup> For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

These are “one another” commands found here in Hebrews. Watch out for one another! The person with the weary and faint heart, the drooping hands, the weak knees, is the person whose feelings are sovereign and they are already on their way to being deceived! Go after them! Lift up their hands! Strengthen their weak knees!

### **Exhortation to Diligence (v.14)**

<sup>14</sup> Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

I do not think these two commands mean what we usually take them to mean. We have a tendency to come to this verse as a proof-text for personal peacemaking. And while that is a possible application of the verse, I do not think it is the primary meaning.

When the author exhorts us to strive for peace and to strive for holiness, I think he has in mind the holiness and peace that were referenced back in vv.10-11. In other words, when someone is dropping their hands and getting weak in the knees and growing weary and fainthearted, they need to pursue the holiness and the peaceful fruit of righteousness that God intends to bring about in this trial. If one gets too tired, he/she will drop out of the race and forego the reward at the end. This must not happen. They need to keep their eyes on the goal – strive for that holiness and peace that comes as the fruit of righteousness.

It appears to me that the author is encouraging the weak to lift up their eyes to look to Jesus, to consider him whose holiness and righteousness we are to share. Stop listening to your pain – your feelings, and set your focus on God’s goal in your suffering – holiness and peace!

If you quit the process, you forego the reward: “without which no one shall see the Lord!” No process – no reward! So what the weak and weary need to hear is an exhortation to strive for that peace and holiness that God has designed for them.

The next series of exhortations tell us that we are on the right track with this interpretation because they are not commands in and of themselves, but participles linked to the command, “Strive!”

### **Exhortation to Alertness (vv.15-17)**

In your striving...

<sup>15</sup> 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; <sup>16</sup> that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. <sup>17</sup> For you know [Understand! – “Know that”] 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.

God has designed your suffering for your eternal good. He has in store for you progress in holiness and ultimate glorification. Even as Paul says, we are being changed from one degree of glory to the next until we are complete (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18). So in your suffering, strive for that end – the end of more and more holiness and peace – lift your eyes to look to Jesus – consider him so that you (1) do not miss out on God’s grace. Make sure no one fails to grasp God’s grace in the midst of their suffering.

There is a huge implication in this word “grace.” Pain and suffering, trial and temptation, are graces being poured into your life. You can’t grow in holiness without pain so it is gracious to have pain.

You see, if someone fails to see or to grasp the grace of God in the midst of their suffering, (2) they become a “root of bitterness” that springs up. There is a digression going on here. One goes from missing God’s grace to becoming a root of bitterness. See to it church that no person becomes a root of bitterness. (cf. Deut 29:18-19)

Now, here again, I think we have mishandled this verse to refer to the need for personal peace-making. We say things like, “If you do not make peace with her, there will be a root of bitterness that shoots up within you, etc.” That is all fine and true but not from this passage.

The root of bitterness is not some root that springs up in the heart of an individual who fails to make peace. Rather, the root of bitterness is the person within a church who fails to grasp God’s grace. The word for “defiled” carries the idea of contamination. When you have people angry at God and caving-in or selling-out, there is a kind of poison that is spread. The antidote to the contamination spreading is to go and lift up their drooping hands, to lift up their gaze to focus on Jesus. Show them the grace of God in and behind their suffering.

Well, what is the result if one fails to grasp the design of God’s grace? They become a root of poison until they (3) finally sell-out just like immoral and unholy Esau.

Vv. 16 &17 are a definite allusion to Genesis 27:34-41.

You want to talk about a man whose feelings were sovereign? Esau is exhibit A! He was so hungry he thought he was going to die. So he made the ultimate trade-off: a single bowl of stew for his firstborn double blessing. And then he came to his senses and went to his father. Read Genesis 27 with me because it helps clarify a potential theological question from this text.

This is for free – but what did Esau seek with tears? Did he seek the blessing? Or, did he seek repentance? Is this text teaching that Esau had gone beyond the point of no return? Did he want repentance so badly that he wept but God said, “No”? Let’s see.

Genesis 27:34-41 (ESV)

<sup>34</sup> As soon as Esau heard the words of his father, [that he had bless Isaac instead] he [Esau] cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry [Tears!] and said to his father, “Bless me, even me also, O my father!” <sup>35</sup> But he said, “Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing.” <sup>36</sup> Esau said, “Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing.” Then he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?” <sup>37</sup> Isaac answered and said to Esau, “Behold, I have made him lord over you, and all his brothers I have given to him for servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son?” <sup>38</sup> Esau said to his father, “Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father.” And Esau lifted up his voice and wept. <sup>39</sup> Then Isaac his father answered and said to him: “Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be, and away from the dew of heaven on high. <sup>40</sup> By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you grow restless you shall break his yoke from your neck.” <sup>41</sup> Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

You will not find a repentant heart in Esau in that text. But you do find him seeking a blessing with tears. And you do find him seeking for his father to repent – that is to say, he wanted his father to reverse the situation – to change his mind – to repent, but as the author of Hebrews says, “He found no place of repentance, though he sought it with tears.” No matter how hard he cried, Jacob could not reverse the situation and bless Esau.

That clears it up!

So what is the point?

Esau had grown to the place where his feelings were sovereign and was willing to sacrifice the ultimate on the altar of the immediate.

That is exactly the danger we are in when we fail to see the design of grace behind our suffering. We become a root of poison until we finally sell-out to other pleasures that beckon.

“God – you’re not worth the pain!”

Esau is labeled for all time as the ultimate example of someone who is a quitter, a turn-coat, a sell-out, a cave-in.

So the question becomes, Do you want to be like Esau or do you want to be like Christ – “who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross despising the shame and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God”?

James 1:2-4 (ESV)

<sup>2</sup> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup> And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

When the author of Hebrews says, “Strive for peace and holiness” I think he means, love trials and tests of faith because that is what makes you holy and yields a peaceful fruit of righteousness!

“Behind every cloud of providence – God hides a smiling face!” William Cowper

“When you cannot see God’s hand – you can trust his heart!” C.H. Spurgeon