

Consider Him

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[0 : 0 0] Now we come to our Bible reading. We're returning to the letter to the Hebrews, and we're reading today in chapter 12, which is on page 1008. Let me just say a quick word about this letter.

This is a letter written to second and third generation Christians, possibly in Rome, possibly in Jerusalem, who are becoming discouraged and disillusioned in their Christian pathway.

And the author, the author is unknown, points them to Jesus Christ, the great high priest, encourages them to keep on in the race because he has won the race himself and is alongside to help.

That theme runs through the whole letter in a variety of ways. Today we are going to be looking at verses 3 to 17 of chapter 12, but I want to start at the beginning of chapter 12, verse 1.

Chapter 11 has been the great gallery of those in the past and right up to the present and into the future until the Lord returns, those who have won the race, those who have kept the faith and finished the course.

[1 : 1 0] The author says, Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder 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 the throne of God.

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted.

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. Have you forgotten that 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.

[2 : 3 5] 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. For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant.

But later, it yields the peaceable fruits 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.

[3 : 47] 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.

Amen. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Now, can we have our Bibles open, please, at the passage we read, and we'll have a moment of prayer.

Father, as we turn from the praising of your name to the preaching of your word, I pray that you will take my human words in all their inadequacy, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray.

Amen. The great reformer, Martin Luther, and any ex-Gornhill people who have heard this illustration ad nauseum, used to say that humanity was like a drunk on a horse, falling off on one side, and immediately getting back on the horse, and falling off on the other side.

Humanity does tend to lurch from one extreme to the other, and nowhere is this more true than in the twin errors that the New Testament warns us against.

[5 : 19] The first error is the gospel plus, the error of legalism, which essentially is that we are saved by good works, that the more good we do, the more creditable our behavior is, the more merit we'll build up.

And that, of course, leads to horrible frustration, it leads to fear, it takes away people's assurance. People feel we're not going to make it, if that's what it's about.

Now, often, people see that. The trouble is, then, it's so easy to fall off on the other side of the horse, and fall into the opposite error, the gospel minus, which is the way of liberalism, the way of thinking, that since Christ has saved us, it doesn't need to have any change in behavior at all.

That salvation happens, so we just carry on our merry way, doing what we like, having the attitudes we want, nothing changing at all. And both these ways of thinking and behaving, the super spiritual, and the totally lax, the author of Hebrews is very, very well aware of that.

And that's at the back of so much of what he says. And that's why, throughout this letter, we get both encouragement and challenge. To the legalists, and those who have suffered from legalists, he encourages people, and says, you're saved by grace.

[6 : 48] To the super lax, those who think you can do anything, he says, there is a path to be traveled. There is a race to be run. Now, in chapter 11, the great chapter of the people of faith, it's been largely encouragement.

Look, they made it. They're the same faults as we have. They weren't perfect. They got it wrong often. But they made it. And they made it by grace. And they made it by faith.

Faith. Now, in chapter 12, he's particularly talking about the implications of that. If we belong to this family of God, what are the implications?

Now, today, verses 3 to 17, it's particularly implications in behavior. How do we live? And next week, we'll look at the rest of the chapter, which is implications as to how we worship, how we live this week, how we work.

Now, these two, as we'll particularly see next week, are never to be divorced. But the author does develop both of them. How is he going to do this?

[7 : 54] Well, he doesn't do it by scolding, as the legalist tends to do. Should is not a word that the Bible is fond of. You should do this. You should do that.

You're not good enough, the kind of thing that... Well, he used to write on school reports when I was a young teacher. Nowadays, you're supposed to affirm all the time, but often used to get that. Not good enough.

We know we're not good enough, and simply being scolded that we're not good enough isn't going to help. On the other hand, we're not going to be helped by saying anything goes either. You know, that will just simply leave us floundering around.

What's our author say? Verse 3, Consider him. That's the author. That is what the author says. Consider him. And that's our title for this morning.

The word consider is look carefully at him. Get the right perspective. Who is he? What's our relationship with him? What about his approval?

[8 : 55] See, the problem about both legalism and liberalism, they don't spring from love to the Lord. They spring from a fear of what other people would think and a desire to please other people, a desire to impress.

Consider him. And he develops this in two ways. Verses 3 to 13, get a true perspective, is what he's saying.

Look at everything. In the light of the gospel. The God who has revealed himself in Jesus. The truth which is applied by the Spirit.

And in these verses, verses 3 to 13, what does this look like? Well, first of all, he says we have to look to Jesus. Verses 3 and 4.

Verse 2 has said that, looking to Jesus. I've called this whole series on Hebrews, Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus, which is a rather good NIV paraphrase of verse 2, Fix Your Eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.

[10 : 03] Now, that's what he's been saying in different ways, with different emphases throughout the whole letter. But here it's particular. He is saying, look at how Jesus suffered. Look at him who suffered such hostility against himself.

In other words, he's not only won the race, he's not only at the right hand of God, he is alongside to help. He knows what the race is like.

Because as truly human, he ran that race, so he understands and can help. Now, the word hostility here literally means speaking against lies, slander, downright unpleasantness.

Now, notice verse 4, which is true for the church in the West on the whole. In your struggle against sin, you've not resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Now, in many countries, as we know, our brother and sister are horribly persecuted. Some of our friends from other lands who have joined us here know that very well.

[11 : 18] You see, in this land, while we have plenty hostility in the sense of speaking against slander, lies, all this downright unpleasantness, we don't have physical persecution of that kind.

If a church is burned down in this country, it's more likely the work of vandals rather than persecution. And similarly, if Christians are beaten up, it's more likely to be the act of muggers rather than of persecutors.

But dreadful things happen, especially in the Islamic State. Now, we've got to get this in perspective. It's easy, when you read about our brothers and sisters in the Islamic State, Sudan, Pakistan, other countries, to feel, in some ways, we are not proper Christians at all.

These are people who are giving their lives, giving their homes for the Lord. And I think we've got to remember to get this in perspective.

When we stand before the Lord, the Lord is not going to say, how did you handle the persecution I didn't send you? What he is going to say is, how did you handle the difficulties and pressures I did send you?

[12 : 35] Because it's not easy to be a Christian. There may not be persecution in the sense of shedding blood and so on. There are, of course, the sheer difficulties of being human. We've no immunity badge to illness, sickness, and death, and all these kind of things.

But, the Lord is not going to go. The Lord knows where he's placed us. The Lord knows what he sends us. We've got to be faithful where we are, not where we might have been and speculate on what might have happened had we been there.

That's why we have to consider him. You see, neither legalism nor liberalism will help us. Legalism will look on with a disapproving frown and essentially say, well, if you've got difficulties, you're not really Christian at all.

You're not handling it properly. That's often enough said. And it's so, it's so disheartening and it's so discouraging. Liberalism, on the other hand, will seem pleasant and easy.

They'll simply shrug its shoulders, sweep everything under the carpet, say, oh, we've all got our faults. And, of course, nobody has helped because nothing is faced. Nothing is ever sold.

[13 : 47] Everything simply brushed over. Consider him, says our author. Don't go down the, don't go down these cul-de-sacs. Don't descend into a legalistic rules and regulations mindset.

Don't, don't flounder around in a steamy swamp of our own indulgence. Consider him. He lived in this world. He knows what it's like.

He's the great high priest who has gone into heaven. Tempted in, think about that, tempted in every way as we are. Temptation is not sin. It's coming to temptation is.

So, first of all, in getting perspective, consider him. Secondly, he says, keep reading your Bibles, verses five to eight, as so often, as he's done all through the letter, he goes back to the Old Testament, to the scriptures.

You see, if we say, look to Jesus, consider him, that can easily descend into a sloppy sentimentality embodied in the, Jesus is my boyfriend kind of course. And that sort of thing will never sustain us in the difficulties and dangers of the Christian life.

[15 : 01] All through, our author has said, has implied, that if you want to look to Jesus, you must read the book in which he is presented.

You must read the written word, which fully and faithfully presents the living word. Now, the spirit is not mentioned here specifically, but it is the spirit.

It is perfectly possible to read the Bible, perfectly possible to know the Bible and not know Christ. I was taught when I was doing theology by many people who knew the Bible very well.

They didn't know Christ, and therefore, they are simply teaching an ancient book. Now, here, he turns to the book of Proverbs, Proverbs chapter 3, verses 11 to 12.

It's a passage about trusting the Lord who loves us and will guide us. You may remember the verse there, trust in the Lord with all your heart. Don't depend on your own understanding, and he will direct your ways.

[16 : 04] That's the passage our author is referring to here. These hardships, he is saying, are not a sign that God doesn't love us. Indeed, they are a sign that he cares.

And this is illustrated particularly by the word, particularly by the word, Lord, verse 7, that you have to endure.

That's the word that James uses in his letter about Job. You have heard of, not so much of the patience, patience, the old sense, you have heard of the endurance of Job.

And Job is the classic story of someone who loved God, was loved by him, but suffered horrifically. So, he's saying, the experience is awful, but Job persevered.

And if you're disciplined, that is the point. So, look to Jesus. Keep reading our Bibles. Verses 9 to 11, remember we are human. Children.

[17 : 06] Besides this, we had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Now, as you know, children who are not disciplined grow up totally self-centered and irresponsible.

And very often become, unfortunately, totally self-centered adults. Think of George Bernard Shaw who said, you can only be young once, but you can be immature indefinitely.

And, of course, the maturing process is so important in the Christian faith and in the Christian life. The point is long-term growth as opposed to short-term gain.

The peaceful fruit of righteousness. Verse 11. That's the same, that's the same image as John uses, as Jesus uses in John of abiding in the vine, growing as we live in him, drawing life from him, growing and not stagnating.

You see, all this springs from consider him. None of this is going to happen unless he is at the center. If we are at the center of our own lives and concerns, it's not going to happen.

[18 : 13] So, he says, remember, we are human. We grew up in human families. And, human families always need discipline.

Now, we know, of course, that families are, that families without the grace of God can be really dreadful. A friend of mine once said, all families are dysfunctional families apart from the grace of God.

And we know that's true. Great gifts from God, family, but also the source of enormous unhappiness and conflict and trial. We've got to remember we are human.

And that is part of the problem often of Christians. Christians forget that all God's good gifts in this world are never going to be perfect.

Family is a good gift, but if we make family a God instead of a gift, it's going to go sour. Like everything else, this side of the fall, families are imperfect.

[19 : 16] And we don't suddenly sanctify and put the word church in front of family. All families, including church families, are imperfect. That's all. Why do you think he's going to say later on, strive for peace with everyone?

It's not just going to happen automatically. Look to Jesus. Keep reading our Bibles. Remember we are human. And then verses 12 to 13.

Look to the new creation. I wonder how on earth you get that out of these verses. Lift up your drooping hands, strengthen your weak knees, make straight paths for your feet.

Point is, once again, our author is going back to the Old Testament. This is from Isaiah 35. Isaiah is speaking about what will happen in the new creation.

The lame will walk, the blind will see, the deaf will hear. And that was anticipated in the earthly ministry of Jesus. When Jesus came, there were signs of that.

[20 : 14] Now, it won't happen perfectly until the new creation. Jesus raised three people from the dead. The cemeteries didn't empty. He cured many people.

Many people remained uncured. And even the three he raised from the dead would die again. But in the new creation, in the new creation, at the end of the race, weakness, illness, sinfulness, and death will be gone.

And what he's saying is, anticipate the new creation in this creation. Don't make the mistake of imagining this is the new creation. But don't make the mistake of imagining either that nothing, that there are no gleams from the world to come, no glimpses of the, of what's going to happen.

So as he says, running the race, we need to get perspective. And we can only get perspective if we look to him, if we consider him.

And secondly, in the second part of the passage, verses 14 to 17, he says, he turns from perspective to perseverance. I didn't actually look for two Ps, they just sort of sprung up.

[21 : 29] Alliteration's all right, as long as you don't force it. It's always easier to get two than three. The whole thrust, this is the whole thrust of the letter. And in the immediate context, it is about finishing the race.

That's been the metaphor of chapter 11 and into chapter 12. Let us run the race which is set before us. How are we going to do this?

You see, once again, this is very practical. As I say, nothing worse than simply dishing out advice. If you go to the doctors or the dentist and you have a long wait, you may pick up something like the Reader's Digest and read, you know, ten tips to improve your marriage, five ways to impress your boss.

Now, sometimes these are quite good, but I have never in my life met anyone whose life was changed as a result of reading these. The minute you have your appointment, you've forgotten all about them. The point is, this is different.

This is the living truth of God applied by the Spirit. And he says, he says, first, if we're going to persevere, first of all, in verse 14, we need to use God's gifts because peace and holiness are, first of all, gifts of God.

[22 : 49] Peace is not, first and foremost, living peaceably with each other. That's important. But peace is, first of all, as Paul says, being justified by faith. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And holiness is God's own character. And you see how important that is. Because if we think that peace is something we create, we're going to end up in terrible trouble, aren't we?

Because peace is a gift. Similarly, holiness. If we think that holiness is something that we do, then we'll simply create a whole set of rules and regulations increasingly strict, increasingly difficult to follow.

The point is, these are gifts of God. Peace in the heart, holiness in the heart, not our own rules and regulations. But at the same time, you'll notice that he says, strive for it.

It's given, but we need to work at it. I don't know if you've ever had the experience of taking a present to someone. You've just left it on the floor and you've bothered to look at it.

[24 : 04] You feel hurt, don't you? Now, similarly, gifts have to be used. Not any point just looking at the wrapping paper. We must take the gift out of the wrapping paper and use it.

Peace will not, peace is something that once the peace of God is in our hearts, then we will want to try and live at peace. Not always possible, but something to struggle.

And holiness, given, once again, we know how hard it is to be holy, how easy it is to slip into sub-Christian and sub-biblical ways of thinking and behaving.

We all know that. And that's the problem, again, I say, with these twin mistakes. Legalism thinks the way to holiness is rules and regulations. We know very well, you can keep all the rules, your heart will be totally unchanged.

And legalism, by its very nature, concentrates on external things that people can see. Liberalism says, well, it doesn't matter anyway. Christ loves you in any case.

[25 : 08] And neither create peace and holiness. So, first of all, he says, use God's gifts. Then, in verse, in verse 15, he says, trust in God's grace.

Now, grace is the great gospel words which includes all the others. The grace of God, which is really the gospel of God expressed in Jesus Christ himself.

And, notice, fails to obtain the grace of God. Now, it doesn't mean that we have to work for the grace of God and receive it as a reward. what it means is that we truly accept the grace of God, then it's going to change our attitudes.

Now, the bitter root here, once again, is a reference to the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 29, Moses says, warns against a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit.

And the particular root there, the particular poisonous fruit there, is someone who knows the Lord and turns back and does not persevere.

[26 : 23] Now, those of you who have been here in the earlier sessions in Hebrews, remember we looked at some of these warning passages about not to fall away, having grace and not to fall away.

Now, this not falling away from grace is deliberately turning our back on the grace of God. it doesn't mean sinning, even continual sinning, as long as it's repented of.

That is the point. Sin has to be repented of and turned away from. However, if we simply, and we're going to come to this in a moment, like Esau, simply turn our back on the blessing and treat it contemptuously, then we are not going to continue in grace.

And you see, once again, legalism, which sets rules above gospel, basically makes people think, as long as I'm conforming outwardly, I'll be fine.

Liberalism, which thinks it knows a better gospel and does not consider him, means we are not really on the journey at all. Sin must be resisted.

[27 : 38] Sin must be repented of. But it is only deadly if we turn our back on grace. And remember, to the last moment of our earthly lives, we'll have to resist the world, the flesh, and the devil.

That's a fact of life, fact of Christian living. How do we persevere? We use God's gifts, we trust God's grace, and we listen to the warning not to be trapped in the present moment.

And that brings us once again to the Old Testament, this time for a negative example, verses 16 and 17, example of Esau. Now, in chapter 11, we are told that Jacob made it by faith.

Esau. I suspect if we met Jacob and Esau, we might well have been more attracted to Esau, who seems to be quite an attractive character, the kind of person you probably enjoyed spending an evening with.

But the trouble is, Jacob, Esau, turned his back on God's promises. He walked away from grace. Now, the story that our author is referring to is the story where Esau was out hunting in the field, and he came back and Jacob had made some lentil soup, I suppose, and Esau, in total exaggeration, is, I'm going to die if I don't have some of that soup.

[29 : 06] Now, of course, he wasn't going to die. He was very hungry. But you see, the trouble with Esau, Esau was a man who lived totally on his appetites. Of course, he was hungry, he wanted a meal, and he could have had it.

That's not the problem. The problem wasn't taking the meal. The problem is, this meal is far more important than God's blessings about the future. Oh, Jacob, I'll give you my birthright if I can have some of that soup.

So, Esau is a man who lives for the moment. He's described as immoral. That probably refers to the fact that he married Hittite wives outside the covenant community and went into the and, you know, founded his own anti-God community.

And you can see that in the book of Genesis where there's a whole family tree of Esau outside the family tree of Jacob. Esau is a man who lived for the moment, a man who thought that his hormones essentially, a man who was prepared to squander the kingdom of God for one meal.

Let's not pretend we are stronger or better than Esau. All of us could easily lapse into that. The trouble about Esau is that he continued that way.

[30 : 28] This is the point of verse 17. when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected. They found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. That sounds as if God says, I'm not going to forgive you.

It wasn't that. It was that Esau didn't believe he needed to be forgiven, and therefore he couldn't be forgiven. In the Lord's prayer, forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Now, don't interpret that in a legalistic way. God's saying, if you're jelly well, don't forgive people, I'm not going to forgive you. That's not the point. The point is, if we don't forgive, we gradually become dried up and shriveled inside, and are unable to receive forgiveness.

A man said to John Wesley, Wesley, I never forgive. And Wesley replied, well, I hope you never sin. You see, that's the point. The receiving forgiveness is receiving grace, understanding grace.

Esau was not forgiven because Esau did not want to be forgiven. His tears were that he lost the inheritance. And if you read the passage carefully in Genesis, it's worried about the earthly inheritance that he lost.

[31 : 48] He's not particularly worried about the inheritance in the world to come, and he walked away from blessing. our author is saying, persevere, use God's gifts, trust in God's grace, and don't be like Esau.

So, as we run the race, probably at this moment, many of us here are wondering, how are we going to keep going? There may be some people here, in fact, who are wondering, ought we to start the race?

Is it going to be too difficult? There may be others who are at a happy point in the race, God is good, and may find the race stimulating and exciting.

There may be others who have been in the race a very long time and are becoming weary, looking back and wondering, have I made a mess of it? Now, wherever we may be, whether in that situation or others, consider him.

he's not looking at us with the frown of the legalist, nor is he shrugging shoulders like the liberal.

[32 : 57] He is a strong and gentle high priest who has gone into heaven. He is Jesus, the Son of God, who has run the race before us, is now at God's right hand, and is ready alongside to help us.

Brothers and sisters, consider him. Amen. Let's pray. Father, we are weak.

Often we have stumbled, often we have turned back, often we have failed, and we know that we will fail again. Help us to trust in your strong and gentle grace, to look to him who ran the race, and is now at your right hand.

And to continue in that race and persevere in it until its end. We ask this in his name. Amen.