

We're closing in on the end of a long-term study in the **NT book of Hebrews**, which is written by an unknown pastor to a congregation of Jewish Christians [likely Rome] who, faced with growing persecution, are thinking about throwing aside their faith in Christ.

In hopes of inspiring them to continue, ch11, gave us a history of faith from the Creation of the world through Noah and the flood and Abraham and the first covenant and Moses and the Exodus and Rahab and the fall of Jericho in the Promised Land; through the judges, kings, prophets and Maccabees- all God's faithful children to the bitter end. V39 says they were all commended for their faith in God but *the complete fulfillment of God's promises didn't come within their lifetime*. **That fulfillment** came a little closer for our first-century Hebrews with the coming of Jesus, but the promise still wasn't fulfilled. Nor has it been for us here in the 21st century. **We're still waiting**.

Hebrews 11:40 states that it is God's plan that all of us and all of those heroes of the faith -and every faithful child of God ever - **will "be made perfect" together**. *That is: the spiritual and bodily aspects of our salvation along with the renewal and restoration of Creation and all the world's systems will be absolutely fulfilled*. And the new Jerusalem, comes down from Heaven to the Earth, and every prayer of "May Your Kingdom come and Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven," is fully and finally answered. That's when God will roll up the "Finish Line" banner and push back the grandstands and "the race" will be over.

But until then, other runners are still coming in. And all those glorified Heroes in eternity [Lk 9:28-31 Moses & Elijah] are pictured in ch12 as a stadium full of spectators, hootin' and waving and cheering the rest of us still running the race.

Last week we focused on that race and the coach's admonishment to throw off whatever hinders, run with perseverance, and fix your eyes on Jesus who for the long-term JOY and glory endured the short-term hardship and shame of the cross.

In all this discipline [SLIDE] is critical to the process. I'm not talking about punishment.

[SLIDE] I'm talking about self-restraint, self-control [according to Galatians a fruit of the Spirit.] Our bed gets made each morning because of self-control. We're using only cash for our groceries these days which is impossible without self-control. I exercise daily because of self-control. It's because of self-control that I can reach into the bag of Oreos and take 6 and put the rest back. [SLIDE] Discipline is *putting long-term goals over short-term gains*. It's about *training and patience*.

This is a real issue for the human brain [SLIDE] A collaborative study between *Princeton, Harvard and Carnegie Mellon Universities* looked at **how the brain functions** when it's calculating near term rewards in comparison to long-term goals. They found that different portions of the brain struggle for supremacy. The emotional bits want immediate gratification while the calculating, logical brain wants the long-term reward.

"Our emotional brain has a hard time imagining the future, even though our logical brain clearly sees the future

consequences of our current actions," ... "Our emotional brain wants to max out the credit card, order dessert and smoke a cigarette. Our logical brain knows we should save for retirement, go for a jog and quit smoking. The famous [SLIDE] **Stanford Marshmallow experiment** of the late 60s & 70s tested children offering them one marshmallow now, but two if they waited for 15 minutes. The final piece of the study revealed that those kids able to wait, generally had better life outcomes -as measured by SAT scores, educational level, health and other measures. Discipline, that is, self-control gave those kids better lives.

But our society is weak on self-control: We tend to want what we want now. As an example: [SLIDE] the instructions off the box for cooking a Pop Tart. You can put it in the toaster- which takes, what, 2 minutes. Or, if that's not fast enough you can microwave it on high for 3 seconds. But come on, if you need to quick-fry your pop tart you may want to loosen your schedule up a little. Or just eat them cold- as I used to do.

Our passage tells us to “endure hardship as discipline” then some exercises for spiritual strength training. And it ends with a bit of the story of **Esau** [Gen 25-27].

Isaac married Rebekah who became pregnant with twins. And they “struggled together” within her. This bothered her so she asked God about it and the answer was: *“Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples will be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger.”* [SLIDE]

And so fraternal twins were born to Rebekah and Isaac. **Esau** [hairy or rough] was firstborn and he was ruddy and red-haired even as a newborn. Then came **Jacob** with his little hand grabbing onto Esau's heel [heel-grasper: conniver, opportunist, cheater]. Their names are certainly intended to reveal the character of these men.

Esau becomes a skilled hunter “a man of the field.” He is favored by his father. From the whole of his story we see Esau wears his emotions on his sleeve and *whatever he's feeling at the moment is THE most important thing.* Rather than marry within his clan he marries two Canaanite women who **Gen 26:35** ...were a bitter disappointment to Isaac and Rebekah. [Samson?] **Esau is rustic, outdoorsy, uncouth.**

The intention of Genesis is to show us how opposite these two are. **Jacob** is described as a “peaceful man living in tents.” He's portrayed **cooking a meal** and is favored by his mother. Esau is “a man of the field” but Jacob lives in tents. If Jacob is described as peaceful [which I take to mean avoiding overt conflict], We're probably to understand **Esau was not so.**

So we find Jacob cooking up a stew. Esau comes in from the field and demands some of the red stew his brother is cooking. Esau is the poster-boy for immediate gratification- and Jacob knows it. He's hungry NOW. And wants food NOW. Nothing else matters. He exaggerates his situation as **“starving to death!!”** And Jacob takes complete advantage of his brother- saying: “Sure you can have some of this delicious

stew- after you swear your firstborn birthright over to me. [Birthright: material inheritance was divided by the number of sons plus one and the eldest got two shares & the blessing.]

And he did it: he just threw away his inheritance –trampled it underfoot, treated as an unholy thing- his place in the family and the blessing **for the sake of a bowl of stew**. He was so undisciplined that he “**despised his birthright**” preferring immediate gratification over long-term blessing. [SLIDE]

Thus Esau is presented as godless, immoral, and profane. A lot of extra-biblical writing expands on the Genesis story presenting Esau as boorish, undisciplined, lecherous, impure and unholy. The Palestinian Targum expands the Stew Story saying that on that day Esau had committed five sins including sleeping with someone else's fiancée. Esau became the Hebrews go-to example of someone profane- lacking any sense of spiritual values. The value of his birthright –something vastly important at a future, familial level- meant nothing compared to the immediate demand of his belly.

And when Jacob had run away after fooling his father into giving him the blessing of the firstborn and Esau sees his tremendous mistake: nothing can be done. There is no more blessing to give- though Esau wept and begged...and planned to kill his brother. [Jacob is also of questionable character: lying & cheating, extorting. Fortunately, over time they both are changed- Israel – and in the end reconciled [Gen33].

[SLIDE]

Esau is presented as profane, immoral, and godless. **He's undisciplined** preferring immediate gratification of his belly to the long-term blessing of his birthright. For the sake of his own immediate comfort Esau was willing to toss aside his rights as firstborn son of Israel. From his wives making his parents miserable and his interactions with his brother he was certainly **NOT at peace** with all men. He has no sense of spiritual value. Thus he is **NOT holy**. And he is **NOT living in the Grace** of God. And **bitterness** has sprung up and flowered in his life- raising thoughts of murder. **Esau is exactly who True followers of Jesus do not want to be.**

The clear connection: [SLIDE] Like Esau, our Hebrews are considering tossing aside their rights as sons and daughters of God for the sake of their own immediate comfort. To abandon Jesus for the sake of ease of life **or even safety** is akin to tossing aside the blessing and birthright for a bowl of soup.

The message is one we heard from ch3: See to it that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. [3:12]. Don't be godless, or profane. [SLIDE] **Don't be like Esau!** Don't cultivate an Esau-sort-of mind! **Don't throw away the eternal for the sake of immediate comfort**. And the means of prevention is twofold: Endure Hardship as discipline in v 5-11 and Train for spiritual strength in v12-15.

Verses 2 & 3 remind us of the hardship Jesus endured- all the way to death. It hasn't gone that far for our Hebrews yet [v4] but Jesus should be their example by the way He endured the short term suffering for the long-term Joy.

Esau was driven by appetites & emotions. He was unable to Endure Hardship as discipline. [SLIDE] Our author wants to protect our Hebrews from making Esau's mistake. So he reminds them of these lines from **Prov 3:11-12** presenting it as if God was speaking directly to them. **5** ...“My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, **6** because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

God loves us –his people- as sons and daughters. And because He loves you, because He wants you to stay on the path of salvation, even more because He wants you to thrive on that path **God, the Father, actively engages in training you in the way you should go.** [SLIDE] By that I mean *God allows certain hard things into our lives to test our humility, our patience, our self-control, our ability to love and most certainly our faithfulness.* And –this is important- these hardships are NOT punitive, but restorative and redemptive.

Now the point is not that all your suffering [illness, abuse, poverty, oppression] is something God is doing to you. There are **evil spiritual powers** that want to seed death in our lives and the world. And there's that **pesky human free will** that allows someone to steal your cc#, or a kid to shoot up a high school or one nation to drop bombs on another. Our author's probably thinking of the sorts of things our Hebrews are experiencing: insults, abuse, loss of property, lost relationships, etc. [Of course there's also Amos 4:6-11 where God reveals to the whole N. Kdm that He purposely sent them: hunger, drought, locusts, sickness and the sword.]

The reality is: we don't know why some hardship has come to us. But the best thing for us to do, rather than ask “**Why me?**” as we are ALL prone to do to, is to **7 Endure hardship as discipline;** to assume God, as our Father, is working for our best interest because He loves us. Being disciplined, that is, being trained by God the father means we are unquestionably sons and daughters of God.

I was a pretty pliable kid but I'd still say Mom & Dad were pretty effective in their discipline of me. [SLIDE] But I'm pretty sure they would say- especially Dad- that they were never really sure they were doing it right. I would say the same thing myself. Some choices we made were good. But some I'd like to go back and undo. **Our author says** earthy Fathers did the best they could and we respected them for it [v10]. But God, our Heavenly Father, knows precisely what we need. And the discipline he sends is only for the good, that we may be made holy like Him.

So in order to be holy as God is holy, and in order to avoid a godless, profane **Esau sort of mind**, We should consider whatever hardship coming to us as God working in us for our own good with a prayer in our heart that says: Help me see this suffering with your eyes. Help me know this suffering with your mind and help me see & know how to endure this

hardship to the glory of God- just as Jesus did. [SLIDE] **Endure hardship as discipline and you avoid an Esau sort of mind.** [And thank God for v11.]

But, as important as it is, enduring hardship is a passive response to an Esau sort of mind. [SLIDE] **We also need an active response. We need Spiritual strength training.** 12 Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 13 “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

“**Therefore,**” that is, since the hardships we face are likely to be God training discipline into us **let’s actively assist this process by strengthening ourselves spiritually.** Let us step up and do the hard work to eliminate feebleness and weakness, disability and lameness in our Spiritual life so we will not embrace an Esau sort of mind.

[SLIDE]

And the first exercise on the list is to “**Pursue Peace with all.**” If our Hebrews author is thinking of **Shalom**, then he’s encouraging them to seek **wholeness and balance in all their relationships**- *and even with their persecutors*. Jesus said: **Matt. 5:9** “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Of course peaceful coexistence with their persecutors might not be possible, but these followers of Jesus are to exercise their spiritual muscles to remain peaceable in attitude and conduct. Paul says: **Rom. 12:18** **If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.** See, you may have to offer gentle correction to someone, you may have to tell the truth in love, you may have to stand [or kneel] publicly for what is right and that may result in a lack of peace with others. We are to pursue peace with all, but still be faithful to the righteousness of God.

We can see this in that the pursuit of Peace is tied tight to the next exercise: [SLIDE]

Make every effort to be holy! God tells everyone who wants to be part of His people: ...you shall be holy, for I am holy” [Lev. 11:45]. **Simply put: “to be holy” is to be “set apart.”** God is holy because he’s completely different from anything else we know. Objects in the Tabernacle were holy because they were set apart from common objects, and consecrated to God for a special purpose. And God’s people are expected to be holy by virtue of living a profoundly different kind of life. To avoid an Esau sort of mind we need to **exercise the discipline of holiness**- which is making the effort to live rightly. Remember Jesus said: **Matt. 5:8** “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

The next training exercise [SLIDE] **is to** 15 See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God... The Grace of God is simply the unmerited favor of God. It is the active awareness of all the glorious benefits the Grace of God provides you every day. To “fall short” of that Grace is **to forget that God loves you unconditionally**. Can we forget that in the church? Well, we shouldn’t- but we do. And everyone within the sound of my voice is responsible to keep their brothers and sisters aware of and so living in the unmerited favor of God.

Our final and critically important spiritual strength training exercise [SLIDE] is to 15 See to it that ...no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. Weeds are taking over certain parts of our gardens beds. Why? Because in March when I should have been paying attention: I wasn't. Now bringing them under control seems nigh impossible. Our author's quoting from Deut. 29 where Moses is warning the people against idolatry; against going their own way rather than living out God's expectations. **Bitterness** that rises up in any congregation is just another form of idolatry.

Rather than choosing *God's path of grace, humility and forgiveness*, we choose to worship at the altar of hurt feelings. **We bow down to our grudges and rehearse our pain like prayers to ourselves.**

We despise the eternal birthright of our relationship with our siblings in Christ and prefer instead the immediate gratification of our hurts and scars.

This leads nowhere, except to an Esau sort of mind.

We have to actively 15 See to it that ...no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many

[SLIDE] Just like our Hebrews we also need to endure hardships we face as if they're training [discipline] from God. And we must actively engage in Spiritual Strength training: Pursuing peace and holiness and Lifting everyone consistently into God's Grace and pulling out the root of bitterness before it can go to seed.

If actively engaged, this spiritual endurance and strength training will protect us from the short-term mistake and long-term tragedy [SLIDE] of an Esau sort of mind.

Hebrews 12:1-17

1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, **2** fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. **4** In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

5 And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, **6** because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

7 Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? **8** If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all.

9 Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! **10** They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.

11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

12 Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. **13** “Make level paths for your feet,” so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

14 Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. **15** See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. **16** See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. **17** Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.
