

Hebrews - the Way Forward (1)

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of pursuing peace with all men and striving for holiness in order to see God and enjoy fellowship with him.

Duration: 42:11

Scripture: Ephesians 5:5, Hebrews 12:14-15

Topics: "Hebrews"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of not just thinking about spiritual realities, but actually receiving them. He uses the analogy of a tree planted by rivers of water, which bears fruit in its season and does not wither. The speaker encourages the audience to not just go through the motions of the Christian life, but to actively receive the grace and mercy that God offers. He also emphasizes the need for believers to strive for peace with others and to pursue holiness, as without holiness, no one will see the Lord.

Transcript

Shall we turn prayerfully together to the letter written to the Hebrews in chapter 12 and to the passage that begins with verse 14. We shall only be looking at a brief section of this passage this morning but we shall come back to it again. Let me read therefore the whole of verse 14 and going on into verse 15, at least to the beginning of it.

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy. Without holiness no man will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and to defile many.

Now if you have your Bibles open before you, you will notice that with verse 11, that verse ended with a reminder that in order to profit from the pressures and the problems of this life, we need to be exercised by them. We indicated when we were pondering over the truth of that verse that the word is the word from which we have our English gymnasium, or gymnastics, and we need to be exercised by our problems and our pressures if we are to profit from them. It would seem that God expects us to profit from everything that happens to us.

He allows nothing to come the way of his people, nothing which is incapable of producing something precious for his glory and for our good. Oh, some of our experiences may be exceedingly painful, very

painful, but it would seem that this passage, and indeed other passages of scripture, insist that this is the mind and this is the purpose of God, what he permits to come our way. He wants these things to exercise us in order that we should profit from them.

But you notice it's not sufficient to pass through them. Many people going through life's troubles do not profit from them. Indeed some come out very much the worse from them, and the reason is they're exercised by them.

They do not respond to them as someone in the gymnasium should respond to the trainer, and therefore their spiritual and moral muscles are not formed, are not fashioned, and they do not benefit. They pass through trials, through tribulations, through various circumstances, some of which are very difficult to bear, but they come out of it without profit. Now the plan of God is that we should be exercised by them.

Let them say something to us. Let them do something in us, upon us, that we should feel as it were the hands of the divine potter in the midst of our wearisome circumstances, making a vessel that is pleasing in his sight, exercised by them. Now in the two verses that follow, 12 and 13, I'm going to summarize in these words.

It would seem that what the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews has in mind is like this. Make clear that you're not living a kind of double-minded life, a kind of double-minded life in which you are seen to have one foot on the pavement and the other in the gutter. One foot on the pavement of God's apparent will and the other in the gutter of your own carnal living and desiring.

If you do that kind of thing, he says, you can only become dislocated physically. I don't know whether you've ever tried it, to walk with one foot in the gutter and the other up on the pavement, but it's impossible. Your limbs will become dislocated, or at least you won't get on very well.

Physically you'll suffer. And spiritually we become dislocated, if not diseased in due course, by trying to walk with one foot on the pavement and another in the gutter that is lower. Now, against that background, assuring us that the way for us to be healed from any previous dislocations or diseases, the way forward is to walk the plain path of God's will.

This is the way of healing. This is the way towards glory. This is the way towards maturity.

Walk the clear pathway of God's revealed will for you and for me. But you say, what is that? Well, now that's what we've got this morning. Beginning with verse 14 and going right through to verse 17, though we are not going all that way this morning, there are certain things told us that we must do.

The clear way, the open way, the pleasing way, that is pleasing to God, the flat land, in the sense, as opposed to walking with one foot in the gutter, to refer to the image we've used already. Now, first of all, the writer has a general and universal reference here to Christian duty. Look at verse 14.

Make every effort, he says, to live in peace with all men and to be holy. Without holiness, no one will see the Lord. Now, here is a general word, a universal word to every Christian man, every Christian woman, old or young, black or white, rich or poor, anywhere at any time.

If you're a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you're not out of this. This is not an optional extra for somebody who feels so inclined. This is a universal statement, a universal demand of all the people of God.

Here are two things that every man and woman of God here this morning should be aiming at, from the pew right through the auditorium to the gallery, every one of us. Two things. We look at them briefly.

The pursuit of peace with all men. Make every effort to live in peace with all men. Now, in a context in which Hebrew Christians were first addressed in these terms, we must be careful not to emasculate the rich significance of that term, peace.

You see, our English word peace doesn't mean a fraction of what the word peace meant to the Hebrew. The Hebrew shalom, meaning peace, is one of the richest words in the whole of the biblical literature. And by peace, we mean generally something that is infinitesimally small in comparison.

Far too often, our concept of peace is the absence of war. Nobody's fighting, so there's peace. Well, that's the beginning of it.

But peace in the New Testament sense, peace in the Hebraic Christian sense, is something infinitely, infinitely more than that. And when the writer of this epistle says, now you Christian people, you seek peace, pursue peace with all men, he says much more than say to us, don't be at loggerheads with people. What does it mean then? Can I just bring out some of the elements this morning? At least three things have to be mentioned.

First of all, it means a harmonious relationship, a harmonious relationship. See, you could be sitting at the breakfast table with somebody, and you're not fighting, you're not throwing spoons at each other, you're not kicking anybody under the table. But there is no harmony.

See what I mean? Peace is harmony. Not just the absence of bickering and quarreling and so forth, peace is harmony. Shalom is harmony.

Peace replaces strife, not with silence, but with concord, harmony. Another element that is essential to it, a wholesome respect for other people. Now, this doesn't come out, you see, in our English word peace, but it does come out in the word used in a Hebraic context.

A respect for others which issues in a genuine desire for the highest good of that other person or persons. This respect is a natural and necessary corollary, of course, of our being in fellowship with God. Now, remember the context.

Those of you who've been with us when we've been looking at the previous chapter in the Epistle to the Hebrews, even the last one, the last message in this very chapter, you remember we saw that God is working everything for good. Even our trials, even our problems, are meant to bring good, good, good. So God is seeking the good of everybody, even in their trials.

Well, all right. If you are in fellowship with God, you and I have to be seeking the good of other people. It's as simple as that.

In everything, God is causing things to work together for good, says Paul in Romans 8, 28. Well, now, if you and I are in fellowship with God, we must cause everything within our lives to work together for the good of one another. Otherwise, we're not in fellowship with God.

If you're working in a bit of intrigue for somebody else and trying to get somebody else a few steps down or trying to trip somebody or trying to get your own back on something, you know, well, you're not in

fellowship with God. God is working for their good. You and I must do that.

A wholesome respect for others that seeks the highest imaginable for them. And of course, this is what agape is in the New Testament. Agape, love, is not so much a feeling for people, though it may have deep feelings, but the essential characteristic of it is this.

It is a desiring, it is a determining to do the best for people. We must add one other feature to peace as considered and as envisaged here. People nowadays refer to it as a holistic aspect.

By that, they mean this. To live at peace with men is not only to seek good for them, but good on all fronts. To be concerned with a person's whole being, a person in his or her totality.

Not just for their spiritual, for that may come first, but for the whole person. You know, the reference to saving souls can be something short of the biblical pattern. Of course we are to save the souls of men.

Please don't misunderstand me. What shall it profit a man if he gained the whole world and lose his own soul? But you see, if I wish peace shalom for other people, I want more even than the salvation of the soul, who redeemeth thy life from destruction. I want the person to be wholly blessed.

Body and soul, mind and spirit, the totality. Now that's what peace is. You see, far too easily, far too often, we get away from the punch of this passage because we think, well now I'm not quarreling with anybody.

I'm not at loggerheads with anyone I know. I'm not throwing sticks or stones at anybody. Oh, peace is much more than that my friend.

Are you seeking the good of this congregation this morning? Are you seeking the highest good for every brother and sister? Is your measure of peace simply the fact, well I'm not arguing, I'm not kicking, I'm not fighting, I'm not battling. I want to tell you in the name of my Lord, that's not good enough. Pursue peace shalom with all men.

Can I make a little quote here from one of our contemporary New Testament scholars? He says that in Hebrew, peace was everything which makes for a man's highest good. It meant the highest welfare that a man could enjoy. It meant that in which manhood finds its highest peak of glory.

And so it came to mean a state where hatred is banished and where each person seeks nothing but his neighbor's good. It means a bond of love, forgiveness and service, binding men together into a communion. First of all then, this is the way forward.

Seek peace shalom, this rich biblical peace with all men. Secondly, the pursuit of holiness. Make every effort to be holy.

Without holiness, no one will see the Lord. The second part of verse 14. Now you see, there must be no confusion with regards to the kind of peace that we are to seek with men.

When we think of peace in our western society, we, as we've indicated all too often, simply mean not being at war with folk. Sometimes we are prepared to compromise principles in order to have peace. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews links the pursuit of peace with the pursuit of holiness.

Now this is important. The peace that we are commanded to seek and to share with other men is closely and intimately linked with holiness, which means that it has a very distinctive hue. Now, will you notice that

the writer also identifies very clearly the holiness that he wants us to seek.

The revised standard version is most helpful here because it brings out a definite article which is not reflected in some of the other translations. The RSV puts it like this. Strive for peace with all men and for the holiness.

Now, you don't have that definite article in the NIV, for example. The holiness. We might almost say that the force of the definite article is this.

That holiness. Which holiness? Well, the holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. Necessary holiness.

Basic holiness. Genuine holiness. Not anything short of the real.

What does holiness mean? Holiness carries the twin notions of that which is different and that which is separate. Difference and separation. A holy person is in this world.

Jesus did not pray that we should be taken out of this world, but we are to be different. We are to be the light. We are to be the salt.

In the world, but different from the world. That's one element in holiness. In the world, but different and separate.

But separate in what sense? You see, the Pharisees were separate. And there are many people today who think of Christian separation purely in terms of, well, Christians perhaps... What don't Christians do nowadays? Is there anything that we don't do? The world does. I was going to say something, but I'm not sure that I ought to.

But this is the way, this is the way that many people in the world think of us if we are different at all. Perhaps we don't go to movies. I don't think that's true of any Christians nowadays.

We don't swear. I'm not sure that Jesus is not a name, is not a word on almost every lip now. Jesus? But mere abstention from these things is not what characterizes Christian holiness.

We are not simply to be separate in that more external sense. The real separation, and the real difference is this, that the holy person is God's person. And this is what makes the difference.

That we're separate from, or don't do this, that, and the other, in order to be the Lord's. See? Now that makes the difference. In order to be the Lord's.

In order to be the Lord's. The Pharisees were quite separate in so many superficial things, but they were not the Lord's. They fought against him like with tooth and nail.

Holiness, insofar as it is evident from the things we do in the body, is to be complemented by this, that in our heart of hearts we are determined to be the Lord's people, and to do the Lord's will, where he wills and how he wills. Now that's holiness. And it's a necessity for everyone.

Old Testament and new. Peter quotes from Leviticus when he says, just as he who called you is holy, so be you holy. You be holy in every manner of life, because it is written, be holy because I am holy.

Jesus clinched it in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. They shall see God. There are multitudes of men and women who will never see God in this life, nor in the world to come.

Why? Because they know nothing of holiness. They don't see him in the providence of the hour. They don't see him in the grace of the sanctuary.

They don't hear his voice from the scriptures. They don't receive his blessing from the sacrament. They neither see him nor know him.

The pure in heart see God everywhere. Something lives in every hue that Christless eyes have never seen. They gaze at the stars above.

They look at the green grass below. They watch the sunrise and the sunset, and they see more than the sun. They see God in all things, you see.

But beyond the vision of God in his handiwork is the vision of God himself in his word. And ultimately the vision glorious seeing God. We shall see him as he is.

Now this holiness then is something that is identified. It is that holiness. It has to be distinguished, you see.

There are other kinds of holiness so-called. There is, for example, the kind of ceremonial holiness of the Pharisees. Oh yes, they were different and separate from others.

But in what sense? Well, for example, when they came in from the marketplace they always washed their hands. Now that was not a matter of cleanliness. It was a matter of ceremonial purity.

Their hands might have been quite clean already, but they washed their hands. And Jesus goes on in Mark 7, 3 to 4 to say, not only do the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash, and they observe many other traditions such as the washing of cups and pitchers and kettles.

All ceremonial. We're not talking now about being clean in the house. That's not the issue.

It's ceremonial. And so they looked upon themselves as ceremonially holy. This kind of holiness is not the kind that the writer of the epistle had in mind, nor was he thinking of the traditional Pharisaic type of separation and distinction.

You remember when they prayed, they prayed on the corner of the streets and they let everybody see what marvelous prayers they could pray. And they gathered their skirts together and they were so different. Not many people would pray in the street corner.

And when they gave their offerings or when they gave their tithes or when they gave something to help somebody, help some needy person, they let everybody know what they were doing. Of course they did. And when they were fasting, well, now they didn't go through the normal ablutions that people could see that there was something going on.

They, you see, were fasting. But it was all physical. It was all external.

All habit. Something that you were doing in the body, your hands were doing, you were doing with the body for people to see the external of your life. This holiness is altogether different.

The holiness which is indispensable for seeing God, whether in the sense of recognizing him and enjoying fellowship with him in this life, or to see him and fellowship with him in unclouded glory in the life beyond, must be inward and deep. A separation of our hearts from the things of this world to the God of this world and of the next. Has he got your heart? Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart and with all thy mind and with all thy soul and with all thy strength.

That's the separation that gives heart and mind and soul and strength to God. It reflects a single-minded love of God that is careless of human reactions and delights in this one thing, to please God at any cost. And brothers and sisters, without that no man shall see the Lord.

No man shall see the Lord. No man shall see the Lord without that. I read this morning another passage from Ephesians chapter 5, which says exactly the same thing in different words.

Let me read you one short passage again. In the first Corinthians, Paul says, do you know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived, neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were.

But listen, listen, but you were washed, but you were sanctified, made holy. You were, but something happened. The blood of Christ cleansed you, and the Holy Spirit came in turned your hearts away from sin, that your hearts are now focused not on the filthy things of this world, but on the Holy One who is your Father.

And without that kind of life, no man will see the Lord. You can sing about him, you can talk about him, you can argue about him, you can philosophize about him, but you will not see God. And if I understand it, that's a kind of death knell to so much modern religion in so many of our churches this morning, where we've got our little gods and we will not give them up.

But that's biblical Christianity, robust, demanding, there is no way into this life but by the death of your old carnal self. And lest there be any mistake about it, says the writer, make every effort. Strive is the RSV.

I don't like the King James Version here, because it's so easily misunderstood. The King James Version says, inasmuch as in you lies, live at peace with all men and go on to seek holiness. Now I've had people in in counseling who've said, well, when it's obvious that they're at dis-peace and loggerheads with people, but it doesn't lie within me to be at peace with so-and-so, you see.

And so they're misinterpreting that translation. That's not what the writer of the epistle meant at all. As far as you humanly can do a thing, you should do it.

That's not what he meant at all. He said do it, pursue it. Well, how can we? Now let's come to the other matter.

That leaves us right in the air. Now come to the next. Some particular congregational responsibilities.

See to it, he says, that no one misses the grace of God. The first part of verse 15. And this brings me to the final thing I want to say this morning.

See to it that no one misses the grace of God. I'll miss over the congregational application of this. We'll come back to it again.

Let's take it generally for the moment. Since peace and holiness are to be pursued with all energy and given priority in our lives, it is essential to nip in the very bud such attitudes or behavior as may be liable to frustrate the achievement of that goal. If we are to seek this kind of peace that we've been referring to, and the holiness without which no man shall see the Lord.

Now, if there's anything in our lives that frustrates that, well, we've got to get rid of them. Now the writer of the epistle brings us to a positive issue here. He says, look, the first thing that's important is this, that you should be able to receive the grace of God.

And he tells the congregation, now I've got to refer to it, the congregation as a responsible for everyone within it. See to it, he says, to the whole congregation that not one among you misses the grace of God. What does he mean? Shall I put it to you in terms of something I heard a few years ago? I was once counseling a gentleman and he said to me, and I'm not exactly quoting him, I couldn't quite remember his words, but he went something like this.

Having gone through the exercises of prayer, public worship, and private reading of God's word, I have often felt that I'm like a person going to get water from a well in a wicker basket. You got the picture? Well, you don't have to go to your wells to collect water. But if you did go, you'd take a bucket with you or you'd take a can of some sort with you with a bottom to it and sides to it that would contain the water.

If you take a basket, well, you put a basket in a well and you're not going to have any water when you lift the basket out. See? And he said, I read my Bible, but when I take my basket out, it's all dripped back again. I've got nothing out of it.

When I come to the house of God, I bring my basket with me, but it leaks out. I don't have anything to go home. He couldn't receive the grace of God.

He could listen to talking about it and preaching about it and singing about it, but he couldn't take anything home with him. When he read the word, when he prayed, he had nothing to go away with. My friend, can you receive the grace of God? Are you receiving grace? Do you take it home with you? Do you dig it out of the word? Do you get grace? Do you live by grace? By grace? Through faith.

You remember the Apostle John in the first chapter of the Gospel, he says about the Lord Jesus Christ, out of his fullness have we all received, and literally it is grace upon grace, or grace for grace, or the Berkeley version is one grace after another. It's a beautiful picture. Is that your experience? Are you able to receive the grace of God? Oh, I know you believe in the grace of God.

I don't suppose there are many people, is there anyone here who doesn't believe that it's only by God's grace we can do the things that we've been talking about? I don't suppose there is this morning. All right, that's not what we're talking about now. It's receiving the grace that we need.

See, the word grace is used in the New Testament in two senses. One, it is the source out of which, the fount out of which, every spiritual blessing comes. It is out of his grace that God sent his Son.

It is out of grace that we are saved, and that not of ourselves. It is all the grace of God. It's the source of everything, but grace is used in a different sense.

God said, the Lord said to the Apostle Paul, when he had the thorn in the flesh, he says, I'm not taking it out, he says, but I want you to know this, my grace is sufficient for you. And then he explains what he means with the next breath, because my power, my strength is made perfect in weakness. Grace is strength.

Grace is capacity to do things. Grace is ability. Grace makes the foolish wise.

Grace makes the weak strong. Grace makes us able to do the will and the work of God. Now listen, my friend, the concern of the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews at this point was this, that so many of the Hebrew Christians, or professing Christians, they were going through the motions of Christianity, reading the scriptures, listening to letters from the apostles, praying together, singing in the name of Jesus, but they were not receiving grace, and therefore they couldn't carry on.

And you can't either. Neither can I. Without me, says the Lord Jesus, divorced from me, you can do nothing. But says Paul on the other side of the coin, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

If you've got the grace of God, you can do it. But without the grace of God, you can't. Now you see, we've got to receive grace.

And as a member of the Christian community, if you're not receiving grace in the services, and if you're not receiving grace when you go through your own devotions in the home, brother and sister in Christ, you've got to tell somebody about it, somebody who can help you. There is nothing which is a greater tragedy in this world than for a man or a woman to go on for 10, 20, 25 years in the supposedly Christian life just thinking about realities that they can never receive. The Psalmist in the first Psalm gives us this beautiful picture of receiving grace.

He talks about the foolish man, and then he comes to the wise, his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his Lord as he meditated day and night, etc., etc. And then he says this, he shall be like a tree, planted by the rivers of water. And then there's a big leap, and the next picture is this, bringing forth his fruit in his season, and his leaf shall not wither, and whatever he does, he shall prosper.

A tree planted by the rivers of water and then bearing fruit. Yeah, but there's a whole gap between the two things, you see. What happens in the meantime? For the tree planted by the rivers of water to bring forth fruit, I'll tell you, that tree has got to send forth its taproots through the soil and get into the river and into the water, and those taproots must draw and suck the water.

Can I use that word? I don't think it's right. Draw the water, suck the water into itself, and only then, only then does it receive what is necessary to bring forth fruit in any season, let alone every season, and for its leaves to be evergreen. See, that's what it means to receive grace.

Draw it in. Draw it in. But you say, how can we do that? How can we possibly do it? Well, there is only one way, and this is, of course, the way of faith.

We must be looking to the God of grace by his Holy Spirit within our hearts, not only to quicken us to the promises of his word, but we must draw. You know, the woman at the well said to Jesus something, which is very, the image is very helpful at this point, not the truth, but the image. She said to him, when he said, if you'd only asked me for water, I would have given you water, living water.

And then she looked puzzled at him and she said, how could you say such a thing? You've got nothing to draw with, nothing to draw with. She was thinking of the well still, you see, he was thinking of spiritual water. Now listen, if you're an unbeliever this morning, if you're not born again, if you're not really Christ-trusting, I say to you reverently, you've got nothing to draw with.

And the first thing for you to do is to trust Jesus Christ as Savior. Do it now, where you are, right now. But if you have trusted him and the Holy Spirit is in your heart, then you've got something to draw with, you see.

This is the ministry of the Spirit to create faith and hope and love and expectation. This is the ministry of the Spirit. It's to enable us to draw upon God.

Are you drawing, dear people? Are you drawing? You come into the table this morning, what are you going to receive? Just bread? Poor you. Just a little drop of wine from a cup, poor you. You'll go out just as you came in, save that you'll imagine something about the death of Christ.

There is faith to draw from heaven's glorious throne the grace that is promised. That's what the writer says in chapter four, seeing then that we have so great a high priest who has passed through the heavens, let's draw near, he says. And he ends it by saying that we may find mercy and receive grace to help in time of need.

Receive it, receive it. I have to close with this. One translator here suggests that we should not so much translate as paraphrase the verb and the words of the epistle to the Hebrews in this way.

That we should learn to keep up with the grace of God. Now, I think that's good. I can't go into the details.

Learn to keep up with the grace of God. No one should fail to keep up with the grace of God. What does that mean? Well, you see, God has grace in every situation for his people.

Read the life of Joseph. Read the life of the apostle Paul. See how their circumstances change.

But wherever they are, God has grace for them. Now, what you and I need is to keep up with the grace of God. He's got grace today, you see.

And if he spares you to tomorrow and there's a duty to face tomorrow, he'll have grace tomorrow. He has grace in every circumstance. Keep up with the grace of God.

God is more eager to give than we are to receive, even though we know we ourselves are needy. What, then, is the message of the morning? Two things that we are to seek. Every one man, woman, boy, girl among us who confesses the name of Jesus.

Shalom with all men. And the holiness without which no man will see the Lord. But how can we? Well, there are many things to say about that.

The first is this. See that no man fails to receive the grace of God. See that there are no leakages in your spiritual life.

See that you're able to come to the scriptures and take away the grace that is promised. See that when you come to the sanctuary, you come in a spirit and an attitude that you can take things away with you. When you hear the word of God read and propounded, however feeble we preachers are, pray God to

give you grace to take something away with you.

And don't be satisfied without it. I would go so far, dear people, as to say this. If you are not blessed by the ministry of the word, you shouldn't be here.

I'm not trying to get rid of anybody. But it is far more important for your soul and your destiny and the glory of God that you're imbibing grace than that you should be in Knox. And if I am not a means of grace to you, and if Mr. McCloud is not a means of grace to you, it's far better for you to go somewhere where you can receive grace.

Don't misunderstand me. I love you too much. I'm not trying to get rid of anybody.

But it's more important, I say, it's more important that you should be receiving grace than that you should be sitting in the family pew until you die and just going through the motions. Oh, may the Spirit of God lead us then and bless us as pastors and people that we may not fail to keep up with the grace of God. Only the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever.

Amen. The rest at a later point in the service. Here, O my Lord, I see thee face to face, and the second stanza, here would I feed upon the bread of God.

Here drink with thee the royal wine of heaven. Here we are to receive.

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