

## Sermon May 8<sup>th</sup> (May Missions Focus, Mother's Day)

'Struggle Like Jesus'

Passage: Hebrews 12:4-13

### PPT#1

Intro

### PPT#2

This is a picture of Josh standing behind a pulpit – not just any old pulpit – it is the well-known evangelist, Billy Graham's pulpit! This pulpit was transported with him all around the world as he preached at hundreds of evangelistic meetings in front of thousands of people. The custom built pulpit was gifted to him by the founder of IBM and includes electronic gadgets that adjust the height and angles, and even include different coloured flashing lights to give a time's up warning! Standing at this pulpit in the Billy Graham museum in Chicago was an inspiring experience as an audio played excerpts from Billy's passionate sermons. The pulpit itself had no special power of course, but the testimony of the man who had stood behind it preaching the gospel faithfully has a strong impact.

This morning we are continuing our series in Hebrews: 'Fixed on Jesus'.

Last week Miranda walked us through the 'great cloud of witnesses' described in Chapter 11. The faithful characters described in that chapter are inspiring. This semester I am studying church history as a subject at Tabor, and I am learning about the countless men and women throughout history that have stood strong in their faith and have made a lasting impact for future generations of Christians.

All of these people are witnesses to God's faithfulness – they testify that faith in God is worth it! They have finished their race and their faith can inspire and encourage us, however they cannot **give us** faith – for that we need the help of Jesus.

Today we will be looking at verses 4-13 of chapter 12, considering three things that we need that God will freely give us:

### PPT#3

- The faith we need
- The correction we need
- The strength we need

## The faith we need

Verse 2 & 3 of chapter 12 are key verses that give important context to the next section of chapter 12. PPT#4

‘Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our 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. <sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.’

There is an important connection between faith and fixing our eyes on Jesus. Verse 4 challenges us to consider how our struggle against sin pales in comparison to what Jesus endured for us: PPT#5

**“In this all-out match against sin, others have suffered far worse than you, to say nothing of what Jesus went through—all that bloodshed! So don’t feel sorry for yourselves.”**

In previous chapters of Hebrews, faith has been described using a range of analogies – an adventure filled journey, a hazardous conflict, a challenging race. All of these analogies highlight both a lengthy and obstacle filled pilgrimage.

There is an admonishment to us to not give up at the first hurdle, don’t lose heart in the journey – there will be a struggle, but Jesus has paved the way for us to persevere, he has shown us how to endure under extreme adversity. So, we must look to him, fixing our eyes on him for the faith we need.

Many of you may know our family worked as missionaries in Japan. Before that time I studied Japanese at uni and worked as a Japanese teacher in a high school. One thing I always loved about the Japanese language was studying the characters used in writing, that each character has an inherent meaning that can be combined to form other words. This results in some really cool ‘word pictures’! PPT#6

Mother’s Day: 母の日

Fireworks: 花火

## PPT#7

The following characters make up the word ‘Faith’: 信仰

The first character means ‘believe in’, ‘place trust in’. The second character means ‘look up’, ‘seek’. These 2 characters together mean ‘faith’.

PPT#8 In Genesis 15:5-6, “God says to Abraham, ‘**look up** at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them’. Then he said to him, ‘So shall

*your offspring be'. Abraham **believed** the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness.*" This word picture is a great illustration of the elements of faith – we need to believe and we need to look up, to fix our eyes on Jesus, seek his help to build and grow our faith. This is explained well in Hebrews Chapter 11:6

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"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

God wants us to turn to him, to seek him, to pray to him to give us the faith we need. In Luke chapter 17:5 Jesus' disciples said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!". Yet Jesus answers that even if they have just a small amount of faith, 'tiny as a mustard seed' that is enough. As N.T. Wright puts it: "it's not great faith you need; it is faith in a great God".

I challenge you to pray to God, asking for the faith you need, faith to trust in our great God. If you haven't committed your life to Christ before, perhaps something is holding you back. It may well be it is faith that is needed to step over that final obstacle. This quote by Martin Luther challenges us to see faith as a bold, confident step, one that won't let us down: **PPT#9**

"Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that someone would stake their life on it a thousand times."

If you hear nothing else in this sermon today – don't miss this opportunity to ask for the faith you need! I urge you to believe and look up – God is faithful, he will give you the faith you need when you ask.

If you are already a Christian, I urge you to continue to seek God for the faith you need; to believe and look up when life throws challenges your way. Our great God will freely give us the faith we need.

Secondly God will give us

### **The correction we need**

The next few verses in chapter 12 challenge us to accept the correction we need in our lives. It is a beautiful image of God loving us as our heavenly Father, a perfect Father who wants the best for us, wants us to be the true image of who we are created to be. Let's read verses 5-11 (Message version): **PPT#10 & 11**

Have you forgotten how good parents treat children, and that God regards you as *his* children?

My dear child, don't shrug off God's discipline,  
but don't be crushed by it either.  
It's the child he loves that he disciplines;  
the child he embraces, he also corrects.

God is educating you; that's why you must never drop out. He's treating you as dear children. This trouble you're in isn't punishment; it's *training*, the normal experience of children. Only irresponsible parents leave children to fend for themselves. Would you prefer an irresponsible God? We respect our own parents for training and not spoiling us, so why not embrace God's training so we can truly *live*? While we were children, our parents did what *seemed* best to them. But God is doing what *is* best for us, training us to live God's holy best. At the time, discipline isn't much fun.

It always feels like it's going against the grain. Later, of course, it pays off big-time, for it's the well-trained who find themselves mature in their relationship with God.

Initially we may hear the words 'discipline' and 'correction' as negative. However, we need to consider these words in the light of a loving parent. Discipline is an outpouring of a caring parent's deep love and desire to see a child reach their full potential. God loves us enough to correct and train us, for our benefit and for his glory. The words quoted here in Hebrews, from Proverbs chapter 3, paint a precious vision of God's loves for us, his children. "It's the child he loves that he disciplines; the child he embraces, he also corrects." This picture embodies one of the tensions of parenthood – we love our children beyond measure, yet they can drive us crazy – and we see the need to help them learn the hard lessons of how to navigate life well. Imagine the scenario of a child who procrastinates going to bed – extra trips to the toilet, drinks of water, endless hugs and kisses, etc. The tired and flustered parent is exasperated and has to gently but firmly explain that sleep is important and insist there will be no more delays! They know everyone will suffer if sleep is resisted! As soon as the child is asleep their angelic peaceful faces remind the parent of their fierce love for this child. I think that's why there are so many photos of children asleep!!

Parents discipline their children because they love them and want the best for them. Because they are loved deeply, they are both embraced, and corrected. A helpful description of this is 'tough love'! When I was 18 and dating Owen, my parents set me a curfew to be home at night that seemed early to me, but obviously appropriate in their minds as parents being loving and protective. I can look back with more clarity now and see their discipline as love and care.

Experienced parents and teachers know that children thrive in structured and disciplined settings. Good routines and expectations give a sense of safety and security. When Josh was in year 3 he had a teacher everyone described as quite 'strict'. This teacher had to take leave in term 3 for an operation and the substitute teacher was, shall we say, a lot less strict. By the end of the term, Josh couldn't wait for his original 'strict' teacher to return to restore order to the chaos!

These verses remind us that God is treating us as "dear children". His incredible love is what compels him to correct us, restrain us and protect us. I recently saw a gorgeous photo of Mark and Jenny Cook's new granddaughter, Claudia, as well as a photo of Simon and Camila's newborn daughter Emma. **PPT# 12**

They were both swaddled tightly in a blanket like cute little burritos! Swaddling a newborn baby gives them security and warmth. Even though their movement is restricted they can sleep peacefully without flailing limbs jerking them awake. Julian of Norwich, a Christian woman in the 1300s, visualised God wrapping himself around us like a garment, "the Divine One wraps us up, holds us tight and encloses us with tenderness"—giving us the security and warmth of his love. 'The child he embraces he corrects'.

It's hard to say 'no' to children at times even when we know it's for their best. It's also challenging to see our children fail, or suffer, or go through hardship but despite the difficulty of this, resilience, perseverance and other positive attributes can result.

The book of James describes it this way (Chapter 1:2-4):

<sup>2</sup> Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters,<sup>[a]</sup> whenever you face trials of many kinds, <sup>3</sup> because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. <sup>4</sup> Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

There is purpose in God's discipline, purpose that is both **immediate** and **long term**. In verse 10 we read that 'God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.' By his nature our Heavenly Father only introduces discipline into our lives that will help us. In our times of suffering we are pulled closer to dependence on God, and are able to share more fully in his holiness. Verse 11 reminds us that discipline is not pleasant – in fact it can be painful. But the ultimate outcome is much more positive: 'it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.'

I am not great at gardening, and to be honest and perhaps jarring to many of you – I don't like gardening (I know, shocking!). But I do admire gardens and the

handiwork of others. My parents have a beautiful garden at the front of their house, one of the features being an abundance of roses. Despite my lack of gardening skills I do know that roses need pruning. So I asked my mum to explain the process to me and what would happen if she didn't prune the roses.

She told me that roses need a major pruning once a year in winter. If roses are not pruned the branches grow thinner, spindlier and weaker and flowers rarely bloom. Pruning can be tough - cutting right back into the main branches, but the result is stronger branches, and a lot more beautiful, sweet-smelling flowers.

If we are brutally honest, we know we need correction. We know we have weaknesses, and our guilty conscience reminds us of our failures. Just as God helps us by giving us the faith we need, he also gives us the correction we need so we can be stronger and more fruitful, sharing in his holiness.

I challenge you to pray for God's correction, to accept your weakness and desire to be more like him, to be fruitful and live a life of righteousness and peace. We can be grateful for God's love and embrace as well as his grace and discipline.

King David knew his weakness, admitted his sin and he prayed this way:

Psalm 51: 1,10, 12b

God, be merciful to me  
because of your faithful love.  
Because of your great compassion,  
erase all the wrongs I have done.

God, create a pure heart in me,  
and make my spirit strong again.

Make my spirit strong and ready to obey you.

It reminds me of the words of a chorus we used to sing:

Change my heart Oh God, make it ever true.  
Change my heart Oh God, may I be like You.  
You are the potter, I am the clay,  
Mold me and make me, this is what I pray.

This is a brave prayer, it is a prayer that asks God to give us the correction we need!

Just as God gives us the faith we need and the correction we need, he also gives us The strength we need.

**PPT#13** Hebrews 12:12-13 says:

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. <sup>13</sup>“Make level paths for your feet,”<sup>[a]</sup> so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

These words in Hebrews are similar to words spoken through the prophet Isaiah to encourage the exiled Jews to stay strong and keep going, waiting for God to fulfill his promises:

**PPT#14** (Isaiah 35:3-4) NIV

Strengthen the feeble hands,  
steady the knees that give way;  
<sup>4</sup>say to those with fearful hearts,  
“Be strong, do not fear;  
your God will come,  
he will come with vengeance;  
with divine retribution  
he will come to save you.”

In Jewish literature, feeble or ‘drooping’ hands and ‘weak knees’ were familiar images for discouragement and despair. The sense of being close to giving up in the midst of the struggle. These phrases of encouragement, ‘strengthen your hands’, ‘steady your knees’ could echo a coach calling out to a runner, exhorting them to keep going. Physically we imagine a runner in the last stages of a marathon – all but spent with the finish line in sight.

The OT story of Nehemiah is an example of needing God’s strength in the struggle. Nehemiah was one of the exiled Jews serving as cupbearer in the King’s court when he heard of the terrible state of his home, the city of Jerusalem. Through the miraculous hand of God, the King gives Nehemiah his blessing to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and its protective walls. Nehemiah faces a lot of opposition to his rebuilding attempts. There are devious plots planned by his enemies (some are life threatening!) and even obstacles created from within the community. He recognised the opposition to what he knew was God’s plan and purpose and he refused to give up or be distracted from what God had called him to do. In chapter 6 Nehemiah describes his opponents, saying: ‘they were all trying to frighten us, thinking ‘Their hands will



get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed'. But I prayed, "Now strengthen my hands".

In what aspects of your life do you feel your arms 'drooping'? Where might discouragement be creating 'weak knees'? God will give the spiritual strength that is needed to face the challenges in front of us. We can pray as Nehemiah did, 'now strengthen my hands'. But perhaps you are in a place where you are feeling strengthened already – this is an opportunity to reach out with encouragement to others, to help 'level the path', to offer the encouragement needed for those in the midst of the struggle.

#### PPT#15

As we close today, consider the longing in your heart – is it faith you need? Is it correction you need? Is it strength you need? Perhaps it's all of the above! Offer your prayer to God, believing and looking up to him – he is faithful, as the great cloud of witnesses can attest to!

#### PPT#16