

There was a time in my life, where I was the most broken I'd ever been:

- *I had made some bad life-decisions;*
- *it all fell apart before my eyes...*

- *I had no one to blame but myself...*

And when I considered:

- *my life;*
- *where I was at;*
- *the brokenness I was feeling,,,*

I knew I was at a cross-roads in my faith...

I was at a point, where I would either:

- *blame God;*
- *maybe lose faith altogether; and*
- *turn away from Him,,,,, ;*

Or:

- *I would go deeper.*
- *I would grab hold of Him with both of my hands, and*
- *cling to Him, for all I was worth...*

Some of you have been in a similar position, hey??? You may be in that place, right now...

For me, it was a defining moment... I believe. How could I ever turn away, or blame Jesus? And so, I went deeper into Him...

And some of you have experienced this. Where you've reached rock bottom. And there in the very darkest valley, you've turned to Jesus, and you have embraced the One who's

been pursuing you; and loving you; and holding you all along...

These are the times we refer to as “The valleys”.

There are valleys of:

- suffering;
- grief;
- failure;
- immense disappointment;
- deep sadness;
- regret; and maybe even of
- self-loathing...

But the thing with a valley, is “In a valley, good things grow.”

Robyn and I, have just gotten back from holidays, And while we were on holidays, we got to see things that that we don't see around St George:

- *mountains;*
- *cliffs;*
- *rocks;*
- *mountain ranges;*
- *canyons...*

And the photographer within me, enjoys these things... But the farmer, who still lurks with me after all these years, found delight in the valleys. The valleys, are where the good soil is, and the valleys, are where good things grow...

I've given today's message the heading: The peaceful fruit of righteousness, growing in the valleys of suffering and failure.

Let's begin with prayer:

Heavenly Father, as we study your word today,
we pray that we would

- find joy in our sadness;
- that You would give us hope in our despair; and
- restore to us spiritual growth and fruitfulness, in the valleys of suffering and failure.

By Your Holy Spirit, open our hearts
to receive Your restoring Word today,
Amen.

Today we're focussing on vv12-17, but we began the reading at v3, to get the context of what it's about.

4 weeks ago (before we headed off for the FECA conference and holidays), we began chapter 12, which is talking about the discipline of God. It's about the tough times we go through.

It's about:

- enduring in the faith.
- the times of trouble we endure, when we're being persecuted for our faith;
- the times we've failed – where:
 - we have sinned;
 - we've been a **terrible** witness for Jesus;
 - failed to be good disciples of Jesus.
- when we've been reprovved.

- Maybe we've read Scripture, and it's cut us deep as we've been confronted with our sin; or
- Maybe a godly person has confronted us, with our sin, and our need of repentance...

These are the times we have been disciplined by God...

And we realised that it's not because God hates us, that we are being disciplined. Our Heavenly Father disciplines those whom He loves... And so, when we go through these dark valleys, it isn't usually the punishment of God – it is the “sonship” of God...

It is the way our Loving Heavenly Father trains us, towards Christ-likeness. If Jesus suffered, so will His disciples. And in the valleys, good things grow.

At the time, suffering is not very pleasant. but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

So:

1.

today's reading begins with a mighty encouragement:

¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees

When things get tough; When we are going through those deep, dark valleys,,, **Don't give up.** Realise that the Lord is with you. He will not desert you, and He will make us grow through it.

Even when we have failed the Lord... When we have sinned; when we are so ashamed of what we have done, and we **know** we are not worthy, **Don't give up.**

You see, if when we fail, we drop out of training, what happens then? We will never become the person that God wants us to be. Suffering/grief/failure, is all part of our training into Godliness.

Do you remember the Apostle Peter? He was the disciple who said to Jesus, "I'll never desert/deny you"... And then a few hours later when Jesus was arrested, "Oh, you're one of his disciples, aren't you." "Oh, no, not me." And 3 times he denied Jesus... "I do not know the man"....

What a monumental failure, Peter was. And he wept over his cowardice and failure... But after Jesus rose from the dead, Peter learned about the grace of Jesus. And he learned that Jesus is the one who gives us a second chance and a third chance...

"I know you denied me Peter, but do you love me? Feed my sheep..."...

So, the first point: Don't give up, no matter what.

No matter:

- how we have failed Him;
- how great the suffering;
- how despicable our sin...

Do not give up on Christ, because He won't give up on you and me...

lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees. Get up. Get going again.

It is in that valley, that we will grow.

2.

Secondly:

When we grow in Christ, it is a growth into peace and righteousness... Let me tell you, whenever the Holy Spirit is at work, there will **always** be an increase in:

- peace;
- a love for God's people; and
- righteousness.

If a person tells you they've had an experience of the Spirit, and so they don't fellowship with the church any more, it ain't the Holy Spirit. If they claim to of had an experience of the Spirit, and they become less pure/holy, it ain't the Holy Spirit...

make straight paths for your feet

That means "Choose righteousness". When we've failed the Lord and sinned against Him, repent. That means to turn from our sin – to turn from our wrong-doing, and make a straight path. With God's help, start doing the right thing.

And when God is at work, the evidence is an increase in peace; love; and righteousness (even in the midst of suffering).

I've heard it said a few times over the last few years, "Hurting people, hurt people." And it's said, as if that's OK. It is a very human reaction.

When a person:

- is in the midst of grief;
- filled with sorrow;
- suffering deeply....

the very human reaction is to lash out, and make others suffer too... That isn't the way of Christ.

Personal pain, is not an excuse for our wickedness in the way we hurt others... Hebrews will have none of that.

You see, this is about straight paths. And it's not about lashing out in our pain, to hurt others... We're given an image here, of a total spiritual and emotional healing, rather than remaining as the broken person we may currently be.

make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

Over the years, I have suffered many dislocated shoulders... And they hurt like Billy-O... And so, when I read this verse, I can feel it...

Do you see what this is a picture of here? When we are in the valley – when we're feeling the broken, some will remain broken. They may even break others as they go.... This is a picture of the lame being dislocated...

You see, one of the images of the Christian church that I love most, is that of a body. We are not the same. Some of us are hands; feet; arms; legs; little finger; kidney; ear; nose.... And together, we form the body of Christ.... And when one of us is missing, a part of the body is missing.

So, when we are in a valley, **do not be put out of joint but rather be healed.** Don't disconnect from the body. And don't stay broken. Reach out to Jesus, and reach out to the body. They are the ones who will help you in your brokenness...

You see, I need you, and you need me, and we all need each other. And what a wretched thing it is, to go through a valley alone. It is pride that makes us do that, you know... You might feel "I'm a private person"... But being part of the body of Christ means I cannot be a private person, and neither can you... Not unless I want to stay broken/become disjointed...

3.

Thirdly, there is effort involved in this. Peace and righteousness don't just happen, all on their own. Yes, the Holy Spirit is transforming us to become more like Christ, but only if we work with Him.

V14 says: **Strive (pursue)**

¹⁴ **Strive for peace with everyone**

That means “put every effort into making peace with everyone”... And I’m pretty sure he’s talking about the church here... If one of us has something against a Brother or Sister in Christ, what do we do? Just let sleeping dogs lie? Just give it time, and assume that it’s going to fix itself???

No!!!. ¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone

4.

And strive for **the** holiness

I get perplexed sometimes, by how some folk will call themselves “Christian”, but they then distance themselves from the concept of holiness... It’s like we want to be seen as “one of the boys” or “one of the girls”, and we’re worried that if there’s a perception of holiness about me, then non-Christians are not going to want to mix with me...

That’s not true. The most holy person who ever lived, is Jesus, right... And sinners weren’t turned off by Jesus... The religious hierarchy used to criticise Jesus for being a friend of sinners and prostitutes...

As Disciples of Jesus, we should strive for holiness. But this isn’t just any kind of holiness. This is **the** holiness. And to understand this, we’ve got to look back to V10, which talks about how God disciplines us for our good, **that we may share his holiness.**

You see, from the midst of the valley, we are being trained to pursue God. And this is critical. You see, the mark of being a Christian, is to have the indwelling Holy Spirit of God – the

Spirit of God who sanctifies us (that means to make us holy), from within. And without **this** holiness, we will not see the Lord.

Why would we ever cringe from such a beautiful thing/godliness/Christ-likeness? ...

And because this is “**the holiness**”, that means there is no other source of holiness. *You may sometimes hear a description of a Hindu holy man. There is no such thing. Or a Muslim holy man. There is no such thing.* The only source of holiness, is from the only one who is holy: The Lord our God.

5.

Fifthly, we learn, that we are not only responsible for ourselves. We are responsible for one another. We have a responsibility toward others (within the church), to help them to keep on track.

Have a look around you. These are your support crew. And you are part of their support crew.

And Hebrews gives us 3 specific examples of how we are responsible for the other. The first example is V¹⁵ **See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God**

What does that even mean? Within the church, how does one fail to obtain the grace of God??? Well, to be clear, in the

original Greek, the word “obtain” isn’t actually there. And the word “fail” is in the present tense.

And so the sense is,

“Be looking diligently, that no one be failing of the grace of God...”

In other words, as a church, we are to encourage one another on, in the grace of God, all the time.

You see, there are many, many, who will never obtain the grace of God, because they are not believers – they haven’t repented and they haven’t believed in the Lord Jesus Christ to receive salvation. They haven’t experienced grace.

They have been offered grace. And for you and I, it is our duty, because we love them, to share the good news of Jesus, and the good news of the undeserved free gift (which grace is), that we can all have in the Name of Jesus...

And if you are not yet a Christian, I appeal to you, do not fail to get on board with the grace of God, and to begin this journey of Grace that we call discipleship... Stop putting it off. Call on the Name of Jesus, and surrender yourself to Him. I can guarantee you, you will never regret it...

But in V15, he’s talking to a church/Christians... Within the church, how does one fail in the grace of God???

I’ll tell you how. It’s when we get it into our heads that we only ever get one bite of the cherry – you only get to

experience the grace of God once, and “well, that’s it then. I’m done.”...

You see, the more we pursue holiness, the more we will become aware of how we haven’t achieved holiness. And when we fail/sin/deliberately turn our backs on God, does that mean “it’s all over, red rover”? No. It is only over if we fail to continue in the grace of God.

How did Jesus teach us to pray? “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us”... Now, you know, you’re going to have to forgive others over and over and over again, hey... But we also have to ask the Lord to forgive us over and over and over again and again and again... And your responsibility as a Christian/member of the body of Christ, is to see to it, that nobody else, is failing to obtain the grace of God.

It is our responsibility:

- to pray for one another;
- to exhort one another;
- to get alongside those who are falling away from the grace of God – to get alongside those who are becoming more distant, and urge them on, to experience anew, the grace of God.

6.

The second example of how we are responsible for each other, is a bit cryptic. It talks about a “root of bitterness”. We are to see to it that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.

Now, we all know that bitterness – holding on to bitterness, destroys fellowship. And we've already covered this in Point #3, where we're told to strive for peace with everyone. And if any of us harbour bitterness in our heart, that will cause much trouble within the church. And bitterness defiles... Jesus said, "they will know that you are my disciples, by the **love** that you have for one another". So, there is no place for bitterness within the Christian church...

But that's not what this is talking about. The "**root of bitterness**" is quoting from Deuteronomy 29:18. Remember, the book of Hebrews, was written to the Hebrews. They knew and understood the Old Testament Scriptures. And they would have known straight away "**root of bitterness**""": He's talking about Deuteronomy when Moses renewed the covenant with the People of Israel. They're not far off from entering the promised land, and it's at the handover from Moses to Joshua, to do the leading.

And the "**root of bitterness**" is about idolatry – it's a warning not to turn away from God and go off, following some other false god.

Deuteronomy 29:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from YHWH our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit,

Alright, so it's a warning not to turn away from God, to follow some other false god... but it's more than that...

It is to have a presumption, that "We're the people of God, so we're never going to be judged. It doesn't matter if I obey God or not. I can do what I like. I'm forgiven."

You see, the sentence doesn't end with v18. Deuteronomy 29:(ESV)

¹⁸ Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit,
(and then it describes it)

¹⁹ one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.' This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike. ²⁰ YHWH will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of YHWH and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and YHWH will blot out his name from under heaven.

Wow... This is no little matter. Being presumptuous before God ("I'll be right. I can do what I like")... That isn't OK. And that's why it's put in the domain of exhortation.

Exhortation is where we are responsible for one another – we are responsible for urging one another on, and challenging one another when we see that one of our brothers or sisters is in danger of presuming upon the grace of God and **blesses** himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.'

And so, we are to see to it, that no one **fails** to obtain the grace of God. **And** we are to see to it, that no one **presumes** upon the grace of God... We are to be **faithful** to Him; Faithful to His covenant; Faithful to His commandments...

7.

And the third example, of how we are responsible for each other, is in the matter of holy living... Now, I'm **not** talking about "judging". It's talking about holding ourselves and holding one another, to a higher standard than the world in which we live.

Now, you might come back at me and say, "Now, hold on a minute, Michael. Remember Jesus told the story about the man with a log in his eye. I shouldn't be trying to get the speck out of the eye of another, because I've got a log in my own eye..." True. but my answer is, "Obey Jesus"... What was the point of the parable? He ended it by saying, "

Matthew 7: (ESV) ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

It's not forbidding exhortation. It's **encouraging** exhortation. What's condemned, is hypocrisy. Yes, we are to be exhorting one another on into holiness, but that means we work on our own holiness first... Get that log out of your own eye. Repent of sin and enter into the holiness of Jesus... And then

help your Brothers and Sisters who have been struggling in their walk with Jesus.

And the example given, where holiness is compromised, is sexual immorality...

We live in a world, where morality doesn't seem to be fixed.

- Apparently it's OK if politicians lie;
- Racism is now celebrated, as long as it's directed at a Jew; and
- sexual morality has almost no limits.

So, in a world where "good" and "evil" trade places, and what's good today, is bad tomorrow, I find comfort in the fact, that there is a sure and certain benchmark, that we can depend upon... And it's not hidden. God reveals it in His Word. And so, as Disciples of Jesus, we don't go by the standards of the world. We honour our Lord by following His Word.

The Lord's design for sex, is for it "to be expressed between one man and one woman, who are married to each other, until death do them part." Biblically, anything else, is sexual immorality.

Now, even when I was a child, it was almost unheard-of, for a couple to be living together, who weren't married. But over a period of about 40 years, society's standards have shifted so much, a person is now considered "strange", if they don't shack up with their partner before they get married...

And for a person who isn't a Christian, it doesn't seem that important... But for a Disciple of Jesus, it matters a lot. We honour God, by obeying His commands. We **dishonour** Him, when we disobey His commands.

And God's design truly is good. Rebecca St James sings a love-song called "Wait For Me".

*Darling, did you know that I dream about you,
waiting for the look in your eyes,
when we meet for the first time.
Darling did you know that I pray about you,
Praying that you will hold on,
keep your loving eyes only for me.*

*I am waiting for
Praying for you, darling,
Wait for me too.
Wait for me as I wait for you,*

*I am waiting for
Praying for you, darling,
Wait for me too.
Wait for me as I wait for you,*

*Darling, did you know I dream about life together,
knowing it will be forever.
I'll be yours and you'll be mine.
And darling when I say
'Til death do us part
I'll mean it with all of my heart
Now and always, faithful to you...*

And it goes on.

It's a great song. What a love song. A love song, for a husband that she hasn't even met yet. But it's also a love song for Jesus. It's a song of holiness and purity for Him...

But sadly, there are many who claim to be Christians, who do not honour God in their love life. For some, they choose a forbidden lifestyle. Others, they just don't want to wait.

And V16 speaks directly to this:

See to it: ¹⁶ that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

Now, the story with Esau, was he was hungry. And his younger Brother Jacob had a pot of stew on the boil. And Esau said, "Give me some of that stew". And Jacob said, "I'll swap you a bowl of stew for your birthright". But Esau didn't have the long-term view "I'm dying of starvation. What good is a birthright to me?" And so he gave up his inheritance for immediate gratification...

And what Hebrews is saying, is "We are called to an eternal inheritance. Do not despise your inheritance for immediate gratification."

And later on, Esau tried to take it back, but he couldn't. He made a choice (you see) that he could not undo.

And sexual sin, is different to other sin, because in it, we are joined to another person. And often, those who have given of themselves so easily, will regret the coupling they have made. And they will wish they could undo it, but they can't...

Esau found no chance to repent...

But I want you to hear this today, “We **do** have a chance to repent. We **do** have a chance to experience the peaceful fruit of righteousness, growing in the valleys of suffering and failure.” We may currently be broken, but there is a way to Spiritual healing...

You see, when I consider the holiness of God, and the righteousness and holiness He calls us to, the more I realise the miserable failure I’ve been. And so I find myself in a valley of failure...

And when we realise how far we have fallen short of God, this is the discipline of God. **This** is The Lord training us towards His peaceful fruit of righteousness...

In the valley, good things grow.
Lift up drooping hands. Strengthen those weak knees. Make straight paths for our feet... Why? Because spiritual healing, is now. Spiritual healing, is found in the dark valleys of failure. It’s available for you and it’s available for me.

V¹⁵ See to it that no one fails [in] the grace of God

I need the grace of God. And you need the grace of God...

And so together, let’s come straight back to the Gospel. Jesus died, to save sinners. That’s me. And maybe it’s you. When

we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful and just and forgives us from all unrighteousness. **This**, is the Spiritual healing I'm talking about. It's healing, for the spiritually broken.

Don't become disjointed/disconnected. Repent; Believe; and experience Spiritual Life (in its fulness).

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father,
we thank You for Your great love.
We even thank You for Your discipline
– You that You treat us as sons.

Father, we confess to You, our sin.
Forgive us, Lord.
Forgive us for our pride
and for our prideful presumption,
that "We're never going to be judged. It doesn't
matter if I obey God or not. I can do what I like."

Oh God, forgive us.

Help us to become the holy children
You want us to be.
And give us a joy,
that we will lift up our hands,
and that our weakened knees would be strengthened.

Lord, strengthen us to follow the path of holiness that You have prepared for those whom You Love,.

in Jesus' Name,
Amen.