

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Following Jesus... **ESPECIALLY when life gets tough!**

(Studies in the letter to the Hebrews)

Forsaking the Way of Regret

(Hebrews 12:15-29)

Study #15

Introduction: Woulda, coulda, shoulda...

I'll start off today with a short poem from Shel Silverstein,
"Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda."

*All the Woulda-Coulda-Shouldas
Layin' in the sun,
Talkin' 'bout the things
They woulda coulda shoulda done...
But those Woulda-Coulda-Shouldas
All ran away and hid
From one little Did.*

In seven short lines, the poet captures both the pain of regret over not doing AND the beauty and the satisfaction that comes from action, initiative, movement, doing.

The truth we'll see in Scripture this morning will remove us from the path that leads to regret and will put us on the road that leads to profound joy and fulfillment - by pointing us to Jesus.

To review...

Last Sunday we listened to the author of the letter to the Hebrews urge us to run with endurance the race God has set before us as we - cheered on by a great cloud of witnesses - fix our gaze on Jesus.

He told us of God's discipline. He said that submitting to that discipline would result in **[12:11] the peaceful fruit of righteousness.**

And he told us that we will find great help in running our race when we make deep, genuine connections with our brothers and sisters in Jesus.

His next comments revolve around exactly those connections.

A Caution to the Church (12:15-17)

See To It That No One Comes Short of God's Grace (v. 15a)

[15a] See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God...

He's calling his readers - us included! - to care about the spiritual welfare of others in the church.

We are to be concerned lest any of our Christian family members **"comes short of the grace of God."**

"Coming short of God's grace" is another way of saying that a Christian might drop out of **"the race that is set before"** him or her.

Jesus has left every Christian with lots of resources to run that race. And it is still possible that a Christian might not take advantage of those resources and might drop out.

Here is a congregation-wide assignment to watch out lest someone be on the verge of dropping out.

It's important because if someone in the church drops out of **"the race,"** they become **"a root of bitterness."**

See To It That No Root of Bitterness Springs Up (v. 15b)

[15b] See to it...that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.¹

The “*root of bitterness*” is not that a Christian who is no longer running the race gets bitter. The point is that the Christian who has stopped running his or her race IS the “*root of bitterness.*”

And that Christian will do damage (“*defile*”) to those in the church who are actually running the race. He will especially damage those who are tempted to quit running.

For that reason, a mark of health in a church is that people in that church watch out for each other, take pains to know each other well enough to know how things are going, and they take time to ask probing questions about the state of each other’s’ walk with Jesus.

People in that church will also seek to restore those who are coming short of the grace of God. They will take steps to rescue those not running, help them to turn around, and help them take their next steps with Jesus.

We follow all of that up with a cautionary tale, told for our benefit, courtesy of an Old Testament character:²

See To It That There Be No One Like Esau (vv. 16-17)

[15] See to it...[16] that there be no sexually immoral or godless³ person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. [17] For you know that even afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.

¹ The Old Testament parallel to this warning is found in Deuteronomy 29:14-21.

² The author has included numerous “warning passages” in his letter to these persecuted Christians. The warnings are found at 2:1-4, 3:12--4:7, 6:1-8, 10:19-31, today at 12:15-17 and at 12:25-29.

³ “*Godless*” is probably not the best translation of the Greek word “*βεβηλος*” as it prompts us to think of an unbeliever, which is generally not the sense of the word. A better translation would be “*profane.*”

Esau’s story (from Genesis 25)

The Old Testament story of Esau is tragic. He was the first-born son of Isaac (son to Abraham and Sarah) and Rebekah. Being the firstborn meant that Esau was in line to receive his father’s inheritance.

But on a day when he was exhausted after hunting, he sold his inheritance rights to his brother, Jacob, for a bowl of soup.

Later, little brother Jacob tricked father Isaac into giving him (Jacob) the blessing that was due to Esau. Esau was the older brother and was distraught at this loss. But there was nothing he could do to win back the inheritance he had already sold to Jacob.⁴

The point of Esau’s story

So, why has the author of Hebrews brought up the story of Esau while writing to Christians who were being tempted to stop running the race for Jesus?

Here’s what I think is going on:

Esau was a true son of his father, Isaac.⁵ And, being the firstborn son, he was in line to receive his father’s inheritance. But he valued a single meal more than those blessings.

Esau gives us a clear illustration of someone who valued the short-term over the long-term, earthly things over God’s blessings. He didn’t value his inheritance blessing and sold it on the cheap.

Later, when he changed his mind and longed for that inheritance, he could not acquire it.

So, what does the Esau story say to you and me, today?

Esau and you

⁴ Or, as Genesis 25:34 puts it, “*So Esau despised his birthright.*”

⁵ He was the son of Isaac and remained Isaac’s son after he sold his birthright to Jacob.

Again. Esau was a son who had inheritance rights. He simply didn't value them. He ***"despised his birthright."*** (Genesis 25:34)

And it is that terribly wrong valuation that the author of Hebrews has been warning us about all along.

He is using Esau's story to paint a picture of a Christian who, for whatever reason (persecution, lusts of the flesh, like Esau, or the lure of a lesser loyalty) has stopped running the race God set before him.

He had not submitted to God's discipline in his life. She has drifted and become a lazy listener. He's not following Jesus anymore. He's living for something or someone else. That Christian is courting deep regret.

Esau regretted having devalued his birthright. And once it was gone, it was lost forever.

And one day, every believer will stand before The Judgment Seat of Christ.⁶

The Christian who stopped running his race will experience regret. He'll be overwhelmed with *"woulda, coulda, shoulda's"* for not having lived for Jesus.

Now, having told us the story of Esau, we come to the final warning of this letter.

The point in what follows is that where there are great privileges, there is also great responsibility. To throw away these privileges results in great loss.

The author reminds us of the scene when the Old Covenant was established under Moses.

Great Privileges for Living Under the New Covenant (12:18-24)

The Old Covenant Was an Awesome Covenant (vv. 18-21)

The scene at Mount Sinai (vv. 18-19a)

[18] For⁷ you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, [19] and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words...

You can read the story in Exodus 19.

The LORD told Moses to consecrate the people before He gave them the Law. They were to wash their garments (v. 10) in preparation for God's descent upon Mount Sinai three days hence. (v. 11)

No one was to go anywhere near to or touch anything on the mountain or its slopes. If they did, they would be put to death by stoning, or they'd be shot through by arrows. The death sentence even applied to livestock. (vv. 12-13a)

The people were told to approach the boundary to the mountain zone when the ram's horn sounded. (v. 13b)

On that third day there was ***"thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound..."***

[18] Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the entire mountain quaked violently. [19] When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him with thunder."

Everything we read here shows the power of God's presence. We're not surprised to read that the Israelites were terrified.

The response of the Israelites (vv. 19b-20)

⁶ See 2 Corinthians 5.

⁷ Note that ***"For..."*** connects with what has preceded.

[19b]...and the sound of words, which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. [20] For they could not cope with the command, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned."⁸

Understandably, the people were terrified. As we read here, they knew that they couldn't approach God. He was holy.

They begged that God should not speak to them and asked that God would speak to them only through Moses.

From the very start of the Old Covenant era, approaching God was a terrifying prospect.⁹

Even Moses was terrified.

The response of Moses (v. 21)

[21] And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I am terrified and trembling."

Terror and trembling were the realities of life for the Jews living under the Old Covenant.

But terror and trembling are not the realities for us who know Jesus. Things are way different under His New Covenant.

Moses' covenant was made at Mount Sinai. Jesus made an entirely New Covenant at a different mountain.

That covenant is marked by the following.

The New Covenant's Superior Awesomeness (vv. 22-24)

⁸ There in Exodus 19, God declared that Israel (the whole nation) would be His treasured possession, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation IF they would obey His voice and keep this covenant He was about to make with them.

⁹ The same thing applied to the tabernacle, where a veil separated ordinary people from God's presence. (9:8)

The heavenly location and habitation

[22] But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels...

By mentioning "**Mount Zion**" the author wants us to think about God's dwelling in heaven.

Earlier in Hebrews the author told us that the earthly tent (the tabernacle that the Jews carried around in the wilderness) pointed to, it represented, a heavenly tabernacle ("*the real thing*;" 9:23-24).

In the same way, the earthly city of Jerusalem ("**the city of the living God**") and the mountain on which the Jerusalem temple was built - Zion - points to the real, heavenly, dwelling place of God.¹⁰

This heavenly city has inhabitants, including innumerable angels. These are the "**ministering spirits**" who have been providing "**service**" to Christians in this life. (Hebrews 1:14)

In every way, the two mountains (Sinai and Zion) are opposites.

One cannot be touched; the other is approachable. God displayed His presence and power temporarily at Sinai. He will display His presence and power permanently at Zion.

We have come to Mount Zion, not Sinai. There is more.

The heavenly celebration (v. 23a)

[22] But you have come...[23a] to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven...

To process this, we need to remember what we just learned about Esau, the firstborn son of Isaac and Rebekah.

¹⁰ The Heavenly Jerusalem is the city Abraham looked for. A city "**with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.**" (11:10) It is God's eternal dwelling place. Rev. 21:2-3.

Being the firstborn meant that he was in line to receive the firstborn's inheritance rights. He threw away that firstborn status and didn't value it. But that doesn't change the meaning of "**firstborn.**"

These "**firstborn**" will receive a rich reward in Jesus' kingdom. The "**firstborn**" have followed Jesus. They will inherit.

So, in addition to angels, Mount Zion / the Heavenly Jerusalem is also where Jesus' "**companions**" (Hebrews 1:9) dwell. They are Jesus' heirs. They will reign with Him. They are all looking forward to a great celebration together in glory.¹¹

In coming to Mount Zion, we have also come to God.

The heavenly judgment

[22] But you have come...[23b]...to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect...¹²

God is Judge of all - including Christians.¹³ God will judge the works of each believer and will reward him / her...or not.

He knows those who faithfully followed Jesus and will reward them with the inheritance rights of the firstborn.

And, of course, in coming to Mount Zion, we have come to Jesus.

The heavenly provision

[22] But you have come...[24]...to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant

The prophet, Jeremiah, was the first one to mention a New Covenant - one that would replace the Mosaic Covenant.

He said that it would not be like that first covenant in that God would place His law in people's hearts, not on tablets of stone. This New Covenant would bring total forgiveness of sins, once and for all.

Jesus Himself talked about it at the Last Supper with His disciples, telling them that He would inaugurate the New Covenant with His blood - something that happened on the next day.

And the Apostle Paul tells us that the New Covenant is of Spirit, not of flesh, that it is more glorious than the old one, and that it is permanent (unlike the old one which was temporary).¹⁴

Finally, **[22]...you have come...[24]...to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.**

The last of the New Covenant benefits listed is the "**sprinkled blood**" of Jesus.

The blood of Abel - the world's first martyr - cried out for judgment and vengeance against his murderer.

The blood of Jesus justifies us forever when we believe. It cleanses us, daily, when we confess.

Summary: The glory of the Jesus way!

In every conceivable way, Jesus' New Covenant is better than Moses' Old Covenant under which the Jews lived.

In fact, Jesus and His New Covenant "way" are better, they are more fulfilling and more meaningful than any other system we can imagine.

¹¹ "**General assembly**" - refers to a joyful gathering, a "*festal assembly.*" Thus, "**the church of the firstborn**" does not refer to all Christians, but to believers who have run their race with endurance and will therefore receive a rich inheritance.

¹² It is possible that "**just men made perfect**" refers to all Christians, for all who have believed in Jesus have eternal life and have been justified before God by that faith. I think that it is more likely that these are those who have attained maturity and will reign with Christ. They ran their race well.

¹³ Christians will be judged at the bema / Judgment Seat of Christ, which has nothing to do with heaven or hell. Everyone standing before the bema will be IN the kingdom of God. Not all will "inherit it" or will co-reign with Jesus in it.

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 5.

They are better than...

...any other religious option, including Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism.
 ...capitalism, socialism, communism, republicanism, democratism.
 ...secularism, materialism, atheism, or me-ism.

So, if, having left any of these other “ways” and having started to follow Jesus, we return again to the old ways we had been following, we will experience great loss. We will suffer deep regret.

Despising the privileges and opportunities that are ours thanks to Jesus’ New Covenant makes us kin to Esau.

So, we will be sure to listen to Jesus’ call to follow.¹⁵

Great Loss If We Don’t Align With the New Covenant (12:25-29)

Don’t Reject the One Who Speaks From Heaven to Us (v. 25)

[25] See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns us from heaven.

The Jews who disobeyed the Old Covenant “***did not escape***” hard consequences.

That is a reference to the rebellion at Kadesh-barnea, where the Israelites refused to take the land that God commanded them to take.

God judged them, then and there, and they were sentenced to forty years of wilderness wandering.

In the same way, there will be no escape for us if we reject the One who speaks to us from heaven.

Is he threatening us with hell? No!

¹⁵ We found the first warning in Hebrews at 2:1-4. This is the last one, making a pair of bookends for the major argument and message of the letter.

We will not escape the loss of inheritance and reward. We will not escape the loss of reigning with Jesus as His companions. There will be no escaping THAT devastating loss.

We’re approaching the finish line and listen as our author quotes the Old Testament prophet, Haggai.

An Earth- and Heaven-Shaking Voice (vv. 26-27)

[26] And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, “YET ONCE MORE I WILL SHAKE NOT ONLY THE EARTH, BUT ALSO THE HEAVEN.” [27] This expression, “Yet once more,” denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

Back in Exodus 19, when describing the scene right before God made His first covenant with the Jews, we read that at Mount Sinai God’s voice “***shook the earth.***”

The prophet Haggai looked forward to the day when God will shake earth and heaven. God is going to remake all of creation. He’s not going to make all new things. He’s going to make all things new.

Everything on earth is temporary and transient. When it is renewed, the new heavens and the new earth will remain. They will be unshakeable.¹⁶

And that new heaven and new earth will be ours.

We get a brief sketch of what we usually refer to as “*heaven*” (better “***The New Jerusalem***” or “***the new heavens and the new earth***”) in Revelation 21 and 22.

We learn that the future there will be filled with worship and that in the New Jerusalem there will be the overwhelming, all-pervasive sense of the presence of God and of Jesus.

It will be a physical place filled with natural beauty.

¹⁶ See Rev. 20:11 and 21:1. Also, Hebrews has already said that this will take place. (1:10-12).

A sparkling clear river flows from the throne of the Lamb. There are all kinds of fruit trees. There is no longer any sign of the curse of Genesis 3. It will be a place of no tears.

The New Jerusalem is a walled city, which was always the picture of security in the ancient world...and the gates are never closed. You'll never need to lock your doors.

Cultural expressions of all kinds will be represented in ***“the new heavens and the new earth”*** - think of art and music and food. Maybe even languages? (Revelation 21:24) (We might still benefit from Second / Third / Fourth language classes...)

Banish all thoughts of your time in heaven consisting of sitting on a cloud and playing a harp. It will be a place of empowered service, of kingdom responsibility and authority.

Anything that will contribute to human joy and flourishing will be present in the New Jerusalem. You'll have a role to play to add to that flourishing.

You will be reigning with Jesus in all the ways that will advance God's kingdom authority over the renewed earth.

So, this - a new and improved, renewed heaven and earth - is the *“What?”*

So what?

Show Gratitude by Acceptable Service with Reverence and Awe (v. 28)

[28] Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let's show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe.

OK. Quick aside.

Over the next couple of Sundays, we'll look at Hebrews 13. It's the last chapter of this letter and the author provides a list of general exhortations, he summarizes much of the letter's content, addresses a couple of personal matters, and says his farewells.

Chapter 13 gives closing comments. The conclusion of Hebrews 12 is where the body / argument of the letter that began in chapter 1 ends.

Hebrews 12:28 is a concise, inclusive summary statement of the letter to the Hebrews.

God is right now, in the process of preparing an unshakeable kingdom for us. He's going to give that kingdom to us. Again, it is ***“The New Jerusalem”*** and ***“the new heavens and the new earth.”***¹⁷

All believers will enter this kingdom. All faithful believers will have an inheritance in it and will reign with Christ in it.

So, since we are in the process of receiving an unshakeable kingdom, let us now be filled with gratitude.

Arising out of that gratitude we present to God an offering of service in a spirit of reverence and awe.

There is no better way to express our gratitude to God for what He is preparing for us than to offer our service.¹⁸

We offer to Him our heart, soul, mind, and strength, time, energy, all resources!

¹⁷ This is the first time the author of Hebrews has used the word ***“kingdom”*** since 1:8-9, where he told us that Christ will receive a kingdom and that He will have ***“partners”*** who will rule over that kingdom with Him.

¹⁸ ***“Service”*** is the Greek *“latruew”*) and not the more common word used in the New Testament - *diakonia* - which describes menial service. This ***“service”*** is a sacramental, “stained glass” word and implies activities like those described in 10:19-25. The author is not saying that Christians will be involved in offering sacrifices on altars but is raising the value of the service we offer to God when we serve Him in any way.

Conclusion:

Now, the next comment we read is Scripture. So, the author is writing under the inspiration of the Spirit. I'm not finding fault.

But his inclusion of this last reminder, a final jab reminds me of a teacher or a parent who just can't help himself - ***[29] for our God is a consuming fire.***¹⁹

Today we have seen the ugliness that results from not following Jesus.

It is sobering to think about the loss of reward and the "woul~~da~~, could~~da~~, should~~da~~" regrets that will come if we haven't followed Jesus in this life.

We've got that.

So...

...we'll end by focusing on the beauty, the fulfillment, and the satisfaction of entering into a life of service for Jesus' sake.

...we'll close by reflecting on the smile we bring to our Father's face when we do serve.

...we'll remember the incomparable blessings we will experience now AND in the life to come as we follow Jesus.

¹⁹ In Deuteronomy 4:24, that was not a threat of hell for the Jews. It was a promise that He would punish them with plagues, captivity, loss of crops, and defeat by their enemies if they disobeyed. Just so, if we reject the privileges offered to us under the New Covenant, we will lose our inheritance in the coming kingdom and can expect the fire of God's judgment in our lives.