

Welcome and Prayer

Thank you so much for inviting me to join you this weekend to dig into God's Word together and to consider what it means to live a life that is yielded to him. In the next few minutes, I hope to set the stage for my two talks tomorrow by introducing you to the book of Hebrews and helping you to get to know me a little bit, as well. We'll also dip our toes into Hebrews 12 tonight, and then we'll finish out the chapter in our two sessions tomorrow. Let's pray and take a few moments to quiet ourselves before the Lord, to join together with our sisters in boldly approaching the throne of grace, and to purpose to receive – and in fact, to yield to – whatever God has for us this weekend.

[prayer - yield/yield]

Bio

A few things about myself. I grew up on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, milking cows, driving tractors, cheering for the Green Bay Packers, that sort of thing. As a young child, I regularly attended church with my family, and I don't remember ever NOT knowing that my life belonged to the Lord. When I was a teenager we joined a Christian and Missionary Alliance congregation. I spent my young adulthood at that church, deeply invested in youth ministry, worship team, and eventually women's ministry. I moved to Chicago in my early thirties and started teaching English at a public high school. One of my co-workers introduced me to his church, Holy Trinity, and I got plugged in there about ten years ago. It's been my home ever since. I met my husband, Kevin, there, and we've been married for seven years. Five years ago, we adopted our four children - biological siblings who promptly turned our lives upside down. In mostly good ways. :) I'm currently at home with them full-time, homeschooling them all, and I lead the women's ministry at Holy Trinity on a volunteer basis. Our family lives in a pretty tough neighborhood on the west side of Chicago, and I'm thankful for the ways that living there has challenged and changed me.

Loving God's Word and Hebrews

I love God's Word. I've been teaching it - to children, teens, and women - for years and years, and it only grows sweeter and sweeter. I remember at one point in my twenties when my mentor talked about getting up early every morning and studying the Bible for a whole hour. It blew my mind that he could read the SAME BOOK over and over and never get bored! But what a delight to find that the more I studied God's word, the more I desired to study it.

Until this weekend, I've never taught much from the book of Hebrews. I've read it, of course, and I've had a general sense of how confusing it can be. And I've known about the hall of faith in chapter 11 and memorized Hebrews 4:12 (the word of God is living and active...). But it's been an absolute delight to get to know this book better, and I hope to pass on a little bit of that excitement and enthusiasm to you this weekend.

CST Shout-out

Jodi asked me to share with you a little bit of my process in studying, so I want to throw in one little shout-out here to a ministry that has grown and shaped me as a Bible student. The Charles Simeon Trust conducts Bible teaching workshops all around the world for men and women in ministry to develop their expositional skills. I've attended their women's workshop in Chicago every year since 2011, and I can't think of any other resource that has so influenced and helped me. If you're involved in Bible teaching ministry, I'd highly recommend checking out the Simeon Trust. They have online courses available in addition to their teaching workshops.

Three Layers of Context

The first step in my study process is to get a good sense of the context of the passage I'm going to be teaching. So that's what we're going to do tonight. I'm going to spend a little time here helping to ground us in the book of Hebrews before we dig into the particulars of chapter 12.

Biblical-Theological Context

There are a few layers to context, and we'll start with the biggest one: the biblical theological context. By that I mean, where in the grand story of the Bible do we find this passage.

If we're going to just hit the high points of the whole Bible, what would we include? Go ahead, shout out a couple of ideas...

[creation, fall, Abraham, Moses, Covenants, Exile, Intertestamental Period, Jesus, Pentecost...]

So what's critical to realize as we come to the book of Hebrews, or to any other book of the Bible, really, is that it doesn't stand alone as a discrete package. It's part of God's ongoing revelation of himself, and it's best understood with a fairly solid grasp of all that has come before. So there's the biblical/theological context.

Historical Context

This overlaps with another layer of context, the historical context, which is the situation of the first readers or recipients of a particular book or letter. Each book of the Bible is written in a specific time and place, and for a particular reason or occasion.

So what do we know about the context of Hebrews?

I'm going to say a few things that might already seem clear to you, so please forgive me if this seems kind of basic, but sometimes it's easy to overlook the obvious, right? God has created all things, man has fallen into sin, the nation of Israel has been formed and has fallen into sin and idolatry, and Jesus has come! He has lived and died, has risen from the grave, and has ascended into heaven. The church has begun to grow and to spread the good news about Jesus throughout the ancient world. And that's where we find the book of Hebrews.

The author of Hebrews is writing to Christian believers who are steeped in Old Testament history. They know and believe that God is the creator of all things. They

know all about the covenants that God made with Abraham and with Moses and with his people, Israel. The book is called, the Letter to the **Hebrews**, right?

But these original readers, who had formerly followed the Jewish religion, had heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. They had put their trust in his death on the cross for their sins. And they were now redefining their relationship with the law of Moses and with their Jewish traditions.

Because of this, many of them also were experiencing persecution, both from religious authorities and the secular world.

At this point, I'll also quickly mention that Bible scholars are divided in their opinions about who the author of Hebrew was, so that's why I'll just be calling him "the author of Hebrews" all weekend. :)

As we get into Hebrews 12 this weekend, then, we'll be keeping in mind where in God's redemptive plan we find ourselves, and where in history and culture the original audience was located.

Literary Context

A third layer of context is the immediate literary context. First, we consider the book as a whole. So just as Hebrews is not this stand-alone message to be read as sort of its own thing, neither is Hebrews 12 to be read and understood in its own little package either.

So how does the book of Hebrews *work*? Well, this letter is structured as one long argument that demonstrates that the new covenant that God has instituted through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is far superior to the law of Moses and the Jewish sacrificial system and everything else in all creation. The entire book repeats this theme again and again from multiple angles, using explicit references to the Old Testament and demonstrating how Jesus is the fulfillment of all of Scripture. In between each theological argument, the writer inserts repeated warnings or exhortations to remain in the faith, to continue trusting in Christ, to persevere through persecution and the trials of life. I'd encourage you to page through the book of Hebrews at some point

this weekend and notice this pattern. There are these theological arguments about the supremacy of Christ and then there are these warnings or exhortations to remain in the faith. What's helpful in that is gaining confidence in the BIG PICTURE message of an author. Then when you get to something that's a little tricky or confusing, which you *will* in the book of Hebrews, you can return to the main message of the book and be sure that you're not going too far off the rails in your interpretation.

After we've gotten a sense of the whole book (and usually I do this by listening to it or reading it all the way through at least a few times, maybe outlining it), we ask ourselves where in the flow of the book we find ourselves. This weekend, we're going to be in Hebrews 12, which comes right after ... Hebrews 11, and just before ... Hebrews 13, which is the final chapter of the book. In its original form, the letter wasn't organized by chapters, so it might be more helpful to say that we're finding ourselves toward the end of the book, after multiple rounds of alternating theology and exhortation, and we're specifically picking up right after the author has delivered his catalog of heroes of the faith. Let's take a look at Hebrews chapter 11 for a moment, shall we? Scan through this passage. The author is listing out example after example of faithful Old Testament believers who put their faith into action. Who believed and therefore DID SOMETHING. "By faith," so and so [fill in the blank].

And it's after this long, inspiring list, and just as we're about to finish the letter, that we come to chapter 12, verse 1, with its helpful indicator, "Therefore...:"

Hebrews 12:1-2

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let **us also** lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, **2** looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Let's pause for a moment and pray once more [yield]

Running Intro

Do I have any runners in the room? I've run some races in my life, and I have to admit that the thought of "the race" fills me with eager anticipation. Running a race can be thrilling. But it also requires endurance. My husband and I ran the Hot Chocolate 15K a few years back. A 15K is like, 9 miles, right? We trained. I was pretty well-prepared. We finished 1, 2, 3 miles. That was pretty fun. But by the time we hit 8, I was getting tired. Just one more mile to go. Kevin kept me pressing on. Then I saw the 9 mile marker, but it didn't look like the finish line. Because a 15K is 9.3 miles, and those last .3 were uphill! So on I trudged, probably literally clinging to my husband's arm, through those last .3 miles and across the finish line.

The message of these first couple of verses is clear: if we are following Jesus, we're in a race. And it's not necessarily just one long party with hot chocolate or cold beer and a cute t-shirt at the end. It's a feat of endurance, and one that requires us to strip off everything that would hinder us. In fact, along the course of more serious races, you'll often find jackets and hats and other gear that competitive runners have thrown aside in order to finish well.

There is a race

Sisters, there is a race set before us. I don't know what your race looks like, but I believe on the basis of God's Word that you're called to run it. I don't know what MY race is going to look like tomorrow or next year or in twenty years, but I know I'm called to run it with endurance. As we go into this weekend, here is the first call to yield - surrender to the truth of God's word that this life here on earth is a race to be run. There will be persecution, there are trials and tribulations of every variety, and there is a daily battle against our own sin.

We are not alone

But know that as we run this race, we are not alone. We have a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, we have brothers and sisters running beside us, and most importantly,

we have a great high priest, seated at the right hand of God, who ever lives to make intercession for us. Jesus has gone before us. Jesus is beside us. Jesus is praying for us!

I finished that 15K clinging to my husband's arm. But - praise God! - in this race of the Christian life we have a more excellent inspiration and encouragement than even the most wonderful husband, better than the most faithful earthly friend, superior to any personal trainer or self-improvement coach. We have Jesus. Jesus! One who has run an infinitely more grueling race. One who ran that race for US, not for a medal or a prize.

Let's worship him together tonight. Let's pour out our hearts in confession, repentance, brokenness, in weariness, and praise. And let's purpose in our hearts to run with endurance the race set before us, looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Let's pray.