

Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 11,

Hebrews 12:4-29: Citizens in Training

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All right. Welcome, everyone. Today, we're diving into the world of the early Christians.

Oh, yeah. You know, we're going to be exploring their struggles, how they held on to their faith when things got really, really rough. That's a fascinating topic.

And you specifically asked to explore the book of Hebrews, chapter 12, verses 4 through 29. Absolutely. A powerful passage.

So we've got some excerpts from a scholarly work about this. Yeah. It's really interesting because this isn't just some theoretical discussion.

Right. It's a letter, maybe a sermon even, to a group of Christians, and they were facing real persecution. So like real danger.

Yeah. They were pressured, you know, to abandon their faith. Wow.

That's intense. So what's the author doing to encourage them? I mean, how do you say stick with it in this situation? Well, he uses these two really powerful metaphors. Okay.

The first is athletic competition. Okay. He describes these Christians as running a spiritual marathon.

Okay. They're facing opposition, but they need to persevere. I can almost hear the coach like, "Eyes on the prize."

Yeah. You got this. Exactly.

And the second metaphor is parental discipline. He says God is like a loving but strict parent. Okay.

And he uses tough times to build character. It's training, not punishment. Right.

You got it. Like, hey, this is rough, but I see your potential. And I'm pushing you to be your best.

Right. That's it. Exactly.

And this idea was actually central to ancient education. Oh, really? Yeah. The Greek word *paideia* referred to this kind of training.

Training. Okay. Physical and academic.

It was rigorous. So not just sitting in a classroom. I don't know.

More like a boot camp or something. I think of athletes or soldiers being pushed to their limits. So they'd come out stronger on the other side.

Exactly. And that's what the author is saying God does. He puts us through the spiritual equivalent.

You got it. To soften us up. Precisely.

And what's interesting is this idea wasn't unique. The Roman philosopher Seneca wrote about this too. Really? Seneca? Yeah.

He compared God to, you know, a demanding father. Pushing his kids to excel. That's right.

Didn't he talk about the Spartans publicly whipping their sons? Yeah. Yes. Not to punish them, but to test their courage.

Right. It's a jarring image for us. For sure.

In dance. It highlights the different cultural views on discipline. Yeah.

It wasn't about cruelty. It was about overcoming weakness. Yeah.

Pushing them to be their best. So for those early Christians, and for us, I guess, it's like when things are hard, it's not that God has abandoned us, but that he's invested in our growth. Yeah.

It's a powerful way to think about hardship. It's not punishment. It's training.

It's God leading us to something greater. Absolutely. This next part is about? Esau.

Esau, right. Yeah. The guy who traded his birthright for a bowl of stew.

Classic example. A classic. Bad choices.

But didn't the author of Hebrews... He changes things up a bit. Yeah. He changes his story a little bit.

Yeah, you're right on that. He combines Esau selling his birthright with the part where Esau wants his father's blessing, but gets denied. Exact.

But that's not how it goes in Genesis. That's true. It's not.

No. So is that, I mean, is that misleading? Well, I think it's more about emphasis. It's like a deliberate choice to emphasize the consequences of choosing against God.

You see. So it's not just about one bad decision. No.

But the ripple effect it can have. Exactly. On our whole life, our relationship with God.

Precisely. That's interesting. What a thought.

Makes you think. Makes you think about what we might be trading today. Oh, yeah.

Our comfort acceptance for what? What are we holding on to that could be costing us our true inheritance? That's the question, isn't it? It really is. Wow. It's a big one.

And that brings us to two very different mountains. Two mountains. Okay.

Tell me more about that. Well, the author contrasts the experience of God at Mount Sinai with a very different scene at Mount Sinai. Oh, okay.

So, like, Old Testament, New Testament, battle of brimstone versus- versus something much more welcoming. Yeah. Yeah.

Okay. At Mount Sinai, the people were terrified. Oh, yeah.

Thunder, lightning, all those strict rules. Sounds intense. And even the animals, if they touched the mountain, they could be stoned.

Oh, wow. The author really emphasizes that fear. The restrictions.

Yeah. Yeah. Definitely not a place you want to be wandering around.

No. Not at all. So Mount Zion, then.

Mount Zion is different. He describes a glorious city. Okay.

Filled with angels, these perfected souls. And Jesus as mediator of a new covenant. Like trading a harsh desert for a beautiful city.

Exactly. And it's important to remember, when he uses the word perfected, he doesn't mean morally perfect. Oh, okay.

It means entering into God's presence. Right. Being in the right place, the right relationship.

Exactly. And so it's like he's showing them, hey, you're not heading toward more fear. You're going toward joy, celebration.

That's right. What a contrast. A powerful one.

It makes you think: what mountain are our choices leading us toward? That's the question, isn't it? Fear and restriction, or joy and celebration. That's powerful. It is.

Okay, what's next? Something about shaking things up. Ah, yes. This is where the author gets really interesting.

He lays out his understanding of the end times, but he doesn't talk about heaven and earth being renewed. He talks about them being removed to reveal the already existing kingdom of God. Oh, wow.

So not fixing the old, but entering a new reality. Precisely. And to emphasize this, he takes this passage from Haggai, talking about the earth shaking, and he adds heaven to it.

Whoa, so even heaven is shaking. That's right. That'll get your attention.

It does, doesn't it? Yeah, it does. So how does believing in this unshakable kingdom change how we view all our struggles, everything we have in this world? That's a great question, and one we'll dig into in the next part of our deep dive. Looking forward to it.

Me too. Okay, so we're back, and we're ready to dig into this whole idea of an unshakable kingdom. I have to admit, when I hear that, my mind kind of goes to abstract ideas.

Yeah, I get that. What does that even look like, right? Yeah, exactly. But I don't think the author of Hebrews was really concerned about what it looks like, but rather how his audience should live with that in mind.

He was very practical. He wanted to see the implications in their lives. Yeah, so let's get practical then.

What does it actually mean to live with that awareness, that there's this thing, this unshakable thing, even when our world feels so shaky? Well, I think for those early Christians, they're facing persecution, maybe losing everything. It meant hope. Okay.

Hope that even if they lost their homes, their possessions, even their lives, there was something that couldn't be taken from them. It's like they say, you can't take it with you when you go. But in this case, there is something.

You take your faith, that relationship with God, your place in that unshakable kingdom. You take that with you. And that knowledge that gave them strength, courage to face those trials, maybe even joy, knowing that their true citizenship wasn't in this world.

It was somewhere else. It was in God's kingdom, the eternal one. That is a powerful, powerful perspective shift.

It is. Because suddenly your everyday concerns- they seem so small. They seem so small.

When you have that bigger picture, it also makes you think about how you live, right? Absolutely. If you believe in that unshakable kingdom, does it change how you view your possessions, your goals, even your relationships? All of that. Maybe not giving everything up, but holding things a little more loosely.

Yeah. With a sense of detachment. Recognizing they don't give you ultimate security.

They don't. And the author of Hebrews, he picks up on that. He says, show gratitude, worship God in a way that pleases him with reverence and awe.

And we can't forget, our God is a consuming fire. That image from Deuteronomy gets your attention. It reminds us we're dealing with a God who is both loving and powerful.

He offers incredible blessings, but he demands our respect. And obedience. That's right.

So it's like, we're in this world, but not of this world. We're seeking peace and holiness. Yes.

But we also have to be ready for the difficulties. The opposition. Yeah.

That's where gratitude is so important. The author wants us to remember all that God has done, to be so overwhelmed by his grace, his mercy, that our response is just this wholehearted devotion. Gratitude fuels the marathon, right? It does.

It does. Not just a feeling, but like- a way of life. Yeah, a constant- Admonition.

Yeah, of God's goodness. Yes. And that spills into everything.

How we treat others. Uh-huh. What we do with what we've been given.

Yeah. How we face those challenges. He changes everything.

It's the antidote to fear. Yes. Greed, despair.

It is. I'm starting to see how these pieces fit together. We all connect.

He's using these metaphors, scripture, his own words, to paint this picture- to show them. Of what it means to follow Christ. Yeah.

In a world that- That's not always friendly to that idea. Not always friendly. And it's not just like a pep talk.

It's more than that. It's like a blueprint. A guide.

Not just surviving, but thriving. Yes. In the middle of very real struggles.

And to tap into the power- it's that. Of- Of that kingdom. Unshakable kingdom.

Even when everything around them is shaking. And that's just as relevant for us today, isn't it? Oh, absolutely. I mean, we might not be facing the same kind of persecution- right.

But we all have our own mountains to climb. Yeah. Our own temptations.

Yes. Our own challenges. Right.

And just like them- hold on. We need to keep that vision in mind. Of that kingdom.

Yeah. Let it shape our choices. Our priorities.

Because in the end, it's not about- It's not about what we accumulate. No. Not about what we accumulate here- In this temporary world.

But what we can carry with us- Into eternity. Which brings us back to that final and maybe the most challenging question. Yeah.

Yeah. You left us hanging. I did, didn't I? The bowl of stew question.

The bowl of stew? I'm ready to dig in. Are you? I am. I am.

Okay. So what's the bowl of stew dilemma all about? The author of Hebrews, if he were talking to us, I think he would ask, what are you tempted to trade for a bowl of stew? It makes you stop and think, doesn't it? It does. It really does.

What am I compromising? Where are my priorities? You know? Exactly. Look at your life. Honestly, ask yourself, what are you holding onto? That might be costing you your true inheritance.

What fleeting pleasures are you choosing over God? It's like he's saying, don't be like Esau. Don't trade something priceless, eternal, for something cheap, temporary. And that bowl of stew is brilliant because we can all relate to it.

Yeah. We all know what that is. It could be anything.

That promotion you're after, the new gadget, fitting in on social media, even a relationship that pulls you away from God. It's that thing you crave, that you think will make you happy, but it leaves you empty. He's saying, wake up.

You're settling for stew when you could be feasting at the banquet table. In God's kingdom. Exactly.

I'm getting a lot to think about here, but it's good. It's good stuff. This kind of deep dive really makes you reevaluate.

Yeah. It makes you reevaluate things. And that's the point, isn't it? Yeah.

to live with this deeper awareness of that unshakeable kingdom. Even when the world feels so shaky. That's it.

So how do we avoid making those trades, those Esau-like mistakes? That's the big question. And it's one we're going to explore in the final part of our deep dive. Okay.

Let's do it with us. Okay. We're back for the final part of our deep dive.

And we've covered a lot of ground. We have. Athletes, strict parents, mountains.

Even a cosmic shakeup. That's right. But the big question is still, how do we actually live with this unshakeable kingdom in mind? Yeah.

Especially when we're surrounded by so many tempting bowls of stew. Exactly. I mean, it's one thing to understand it all.

Right. But how do we put it into practice? Yeah. How do we actually let it change- right?

How we live in the world? It's like having a treasure map. Okay. You know, you can have the map.

Yeah. But you still have to set sail. Yeah.

Face the storms. Make that journey. It's putting faith into action.

You got it. So the author of Hebrews, he gives us some clues. He does.

Some practical ways to actually cultivate that awareness. Yeah. And to actually start living differently.

Okay. So remind me. What were those themes again? Well, we talked about discipline.

Right. Perseverance. Gratitude.

Yeah. Okay. Yeah.

These aren't just concepts. Right. They're practices.

Okay. Spiritual disciplines that can strengthen our connection to that unshakable kingdom. So let's break those down, starting with discipline.

Okay. We talked about that paideia. Yes.

That ancient concept of training. Right. But how do we apply that today? Well- I mean, I'm not going to start whipping myself into shape or anything.

Well, no. We don't have to go that far. Okay.

Good. But we can embrace the spirit of it. Think of it as training, intentional training.

For our minds, our spirits. Yeah. Setting aside time for prayer, studying Scripture, doing things that help us grow.

So it's like a spiritual workout routine. Yes. Like an athlete would have for their physical training.

Okay. So we're talking discipline, consistency- that's it. Pushing ourselves.

Exactly. Because spiritual growth takes effort. It does.

Just like anything worthwhile. Yeah. And it's not always going to be easy.

No. Comfortable. There are going to be times we want to give up.

Right. Right. When that stew is looking really tempting.

Exactly. And that's where perseverance comes in, right? Yeah. Not giving up when things get tough.

Remembering that big picture, the ultimate goal. He uses those athletic metaphors, remember? Yeah. To remind us it's a marathon.

Right. Not a sprint. No.

Obstacles, setbacks, exhaustion, all part of it. But we've got to keep going. Keep moving forward.

And what keeps us going? Gratitude. Gratitude. We've talked about it a lot.

Yeah. Yeah. It seems like it's essential.

It is. It's crucial. Yeah.

Gratitude is a choice. Okay. A perspective shift.

So even when things are tough. Even then. We can choose to focus on what we do have.

The blessings. Yeah. It shifts our hearts.

Back towards God. It's choosing to see the glass half full. Yes.

Even when we're surrounded by negativity. And remembering there's always something. To be thankful for.

Always. So it seems like, to answer our big question, how do we avoid trading our birthright? That bowl of stew. It's discipline, perseverance, and gratitude.

It all works together. They're all connected. It's about cultivating those practices.

Seeing those challenges as opportunities to grow. And not forgetting that gift. Our place in God's kingdom.

You got it. It's like we're given this spiritual toolkit, right? This toolkit. Not to escape the world.

No. But to navigate it. Yeah.

With wisdom, courage, and gratitude. That's it. And then, the world starts to look different.

It does. The stew loses its appeal. It does.

And that unshakeable kingdom. Yeah. It becomes the treasure worth chasing.

The only one. Wow. I am feeling inspired.

Good. This deep dive has given me so much to think about. Me too.

To apply to my own life. I hope our listeners are feeling that too. I hope so too.

And you know, this is just the beginning. It is. That journey towards that unshakeable kingdom is a lifelong adventure.

Yeah. There's always more to discover. Always more to experience.

That's the beauty of it. So keep diving. Keep exploring.

And keep the faith. Until next time.