

# BELPRES CHURCH

## **Greater Joy**

### **Hebrews 12:1-2**

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Some of the people who inspire me the most are some senior citizens in this church who have been serving Jesus for decades, doing things like caring for drug addicts, mentoring different generations of youth, inviting refugees to come and live with them in their homes. Many of these senior citizens, even still in their 90's, doing things like caring for Alzheimer's patients in the assisted living facilities that they live in, and those of us who are a little bit younger, or a lot younger are blessed to be in a church where we have these kinds of senior citizens who have been radically serving Jesus for decades to inspire us and to teach those of us who are younger what it means to be a disciple. A disciple is simply someone who is learning to be like Jesus. We've talked about six marks of a disciple, and one of those marks of a disciple is disciples live sacrificially, like these senior citizens do. Disciples live sacrificially, which can be hard to do, because the problem with living sacrificially is it requires sacrifice, which we don't always want to do, sacrifice time, sacrifice money, sacrifice emotional energy.

We don't always want to do that sacrifice thing. I heard a mom tell a story of when her kids were young. One morning, her two boys were arguing over who was going to get the first pancake, and so she said, "Okay, boys, if Jesus were here, He would say, 'Let My brother have the first pancake. I can wait.'" So the older boy turned to the younger and said, "Ryan, you be Jesus."

We don't always like to sacrifice, but I have observed that the people who inspire me the most live sacrificially, like the senior citizens in this church I was talking about. I've also noticed that people who live sacrificially for Jesus and the kingdom of God often have way more joy than people who don't. Right now, there are probably several different groups of people in this room. Some of you right now might be thinking, "Man, I am

already making all kinds of sacrifices. I am exhausted making sacrifices, and I do not want to hear a sermon about how I have to sacrifice more."

Well, that's good, because that's not the sermon I'm going to preach. Some of you may need to sacrifice less, because some of the sacrifices you're making may not be the sacrifices that God is actually calling you to make. I think of parents who are often just exhausted between long hours at work and a whole host of kids activities. If you're in that camp, you may need to ask God, "Are all these sacrifices the one You're calling me to or, are some driven by cultural notions of what success and the good life look like?," that what constitutes the good life is having kids with a lot of great activities so that they can get into a great college, so that they can then go on and get a great job, so that they can have kids with a lot of great activities who can get into a great college, so that they can get into a great job. See, we are teaching our kids what values are most important by the activities where we prioritize in their life.

And if you're exhausted making sacrifices, ask God, "Are all these the ones You're asking me to make, and how can I order my life in a way that I show others and myself that the thing that brings the most lasting joy, the priority, the order of priorities that brings the most lasting joy, God first, family second, community third, everything else after that?" Then, there may be another group of you, you really are making sacrifices that God is asking you to make, and it's hard right now, and my hope would be that this sermon would encourage you. Then, there may be folks here today who aren't actually living very sacrificially at all, which is all of us, probably at least sometimes. I think when that happens, it's because we don't have a biblical understanding of what sacrifice is, and what sacrificial living is from a biblical perspective, which may be why fewer and fewer people in our culture are willing to live sacrificially at all. According to the Census Bureau, volunteering, which was already going down pre-pandemic, volunteering declined a whopping 23% in the last two years.

23% fewer volunteers across the United States. Between 2021 and '22, charitable giving declined 10.7% in just one year. One survey that's been done for several decades showed that the importance to Americans of things like giving, serving, participating in church, or civic activities has steadily declined over the decades. The only thing that has increased is the importance of money to Americans. That's gone up.

Everything else, down. We are less willing to contribute to the common good. We all want the pancakes first, and we want them cooked exactly the way that we want them cooked, and we don't actually care very much about what other people might want or need, and it's tearing families, and schools, and neighborhoods, and churches, tearing churches apart. That is a nation that cannot long endure. And I'm not talking about other people.

I'm not talking about all y'all. I'm not talking about people out there. I'm not talking about other people, I am talking about me. I'm talking about myself. All I need to do is get on an airplane to discover how small my capacity for sacrifice is, as I start to passive-aggressively fight for the elbow room on the armrest with some stranger, or feel a surge of irritation if the person in front of me reclines their seat.

That one probably is justified, but the others ... Last week, I was on a four-hour flight from Dallas to here, and a woman asked a man in the row behind me if he'd be willing to give her his aisle seat in exchange for his middle seat, one row up so that she could sit closer to her ten-year-old son, and he hesitated, but then he said, "Oh, okay," and he took the middle seat, and I was in awe of the sacrificial love for a stranger, and I was really glad she didn't ask me. But here's the thing, the Bible consistently links sacrificial living with joy. Psalm 27 says, "At his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy." The apostle Paul says, "Even if I'm being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and I rejoice."

Then, the text I want to look at today is from Hebrews 12, and it says this, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, scorning its shame and set down at the right hand of the throne of God." For the joy set before Him. It doesn't say for the duty set before Him. It doesn't say for the guilt trip, the pastor set before Him on a sermon on sacrifice. For the joy set before Him endured the cross. And what that's getting at is that sacrificial living is the door we walk through to greater joy.

I love that I'm a runner, and so I love this passage because it talks about running the race with perseverance. And as a runner myself, I just love that image of the freedom of a runner, to just be running free of all encumbrances. I mean, who's more free, the runner who can run a mile in under four minutes, or the couch potato who gets winded reaching for the remote? Obviously it's the athlete. By how fast they can run, it's like they're even free from the laws of gravity, but what got them there was sacrificing time, sacrificing physical comfort in order to train.

When we sacrifice some of what we want to empower our spouses, we get the greater joy of a fulfilling marriage. When we sacrifice to serve others in the name of Jesus, we get the greater joy of changing people's lives and being part of that. And what may feel like a sacrifice at first eventually gives us so much joy, that it doesn't feel like a sacrifice on the other side of it. And in order to do that, this passage says, "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." What that's getting at is sacrificial living means giving up something of lesser or no value, like sin, to gain something valuable.

Runners cast off anything that would slow him down. You would not run a marathon in a suit because it would slow you down. Sin slows us down. The bad habit that we can't break, the grudge we hang onto that eats us up alive with anger, the lust that drives us crazy, all of that entangles us. So the passage says, "Cast it off."

And this isn't sin management. Okay, this is not like, "Okay, I'm going to work really hard to sin less so that God doesn't zap me." This isn't sin management. That's not what we're focused on. It's about being focused on the greater joy, of living the more abundant, deeper, bigger life that Jesus wants to give us.

The Washington Huskies have had a great season this year. Have they not? Like undefeated, right? But I don't think they got there by walking out onto the field every game and saying, "Okay guys, whatever happens here, let's just not get a penalty." Okay, that's sin management.

They didn't get to that great record by focusing there. They focused on, "How can we play the game the best we can?," and avoiding penalties is part of that, because penalties set you back, but the focus is not on casting off penalties. The focus is, "How can we play the game the best we can for the joy set before us of defeating Oregon?" Yes.

Barely, but defeating Oregon. Thanks be to God. But it's not just sin that we cast off, let us throw off everything that hinders. Not just sin, everything that hinders, and what that means is that sacrificial living sometimes is giving up good things for even better things. That's the hard one.

Giving up good things for even better things, right? Some of you have turned down promotions, which is a good thing. A promotion is a good thing, but you've turned them down so that you could have more time for faith, and family, and friends, and being part of God's mission in the world, or maybe it's not giving up something so much as reallocating time from doing a whole bunch of good things to just doing a couple of even better things that God calls us to, in order to have more peace, and more balance, and more sanity in our life, like Annie was talking about last week, which brings me to the last point, sacrificial living releases the power of God to heal and to transform. Back to those senior citizens in this church who inspire me. By doing things like caring for drug addicts, they help people get off drugs.

By welcoming refugees into their homes, they help entire families start a new life. Imagine what that meant for those families, coming from a different country to live in their home to get a new life. When we sacrifice time, money, energy, emotional capacity for each other and for the common good, we get community and mutual support, which is

disappearing quickly in our culture. When we can't sacrifice for the common good, we don't have community anymore, we don't have mutual support anymore, and that is a hard life, and I will believe to my dying day that Jesus and His church are called to be the antidote to that, and can be, and then we get to be part of that healing and that transformation, which rescues us from the prison of our small ambitions of just me and mine. We are all sacrificing for something, job, reputation, social acceptance.

We're all sacrificing for something. The question is, "For what?" So then, how do we do this? Because it's hard, right? Sacrifice requires sacrifice. It's hard.

How do we do this? How do we find the energy? How do we find the motivation? Three action steps for this week, all beginning with the word, look. First, look to the joy set before you. I think sometimes we get so focused on, "Oh, I'm going to have to sacrifice this much money, or this much time, or this much emotional capacity," and that's intimidating.

That's daunting. But this passage says that Jesus focused on the joy that was set before Him. So what's the greater joy that could be in your life on the other side of sacrifice? When my kids were little, I don't want to shock you, but I would sometimes yell at them, and my wife would sometimes say, "I don't think you should yell at them so much," but I taught writing and persuasion at Stanford, so I always had a great comeback. I'd say, "Oh, yeah? Well, you yell at them too."

Devastating argument. Then, one day, she said, "You know, I spend all day with them, but you don't get to spend a lot of time with them because you're working, so when you yell at them, that is a large percentage of their experience of you." Ooh. "Do you want them to grow up being afraid of you?," to which I said, "Oh, yeah? Well, that's a really good point, dear."

And so from then on, I never yelled at my kids again, not once. Obviously, that's not true, but I did end up yelling at them a lot less, and here's how I did it. The way I did it was before I said something to them or discipline them, I would think to myself, I would think, "When they're high school, college, young adults, I want them to talk to me. I want them to feel like they can come to me with the deep, meaningful, and even painful things in their life," and how I handle this moment right now will determine whether or not they talk to me about the meaningful things in their life when they're young adults. Sometimes just before I discipline them, I just say under my breath, "They talk to me as young adults."

And it helped me "Sacrifice" what I wanted in that moment, which is to vent my anger and my frustration at them, and instead, respond in a better way. I wasn't perfect, still yell at them sometimes for which I always apologize, but I yelled a lot less. And now that they are young adults, they do talk to me about the deep, the meaningful, and even the painful things in their life. Now, I didn't do that by saying, "Whatever you do, don't yell, don't

yell, don't yell, don't yell." That's sin management. I did it by focusing on the greater joy that my wife set in front of me of having young adult kids who will talk to me.

What's the greater joy God is inviting you into on the other side of sacrifice? Second, look to people who inspire you. This passage starts with, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses," and what that's referring to is the previous chapter, where the author just kind of talked about all the heroes of the faith in the Bible, people like Abraham, and Isaac, and Moses, and the whole chapter, and that's what that cloud of witnesses is referring to, right? Sometimes people interpret this as saying, "We have this cloud of witnesses, all of these people who've gone before us in the faith, and they're watching us, and they're cheering us on as we live our life of faith." No. That's creepy.

I don't want Moses watching everything I'm doing. That's creepy. I don't think that's what it means. I think it means we have this great cloud of examples, people who live sacrificially and did great things to inspire us. Who inspires you? Look at them.

Then, finally and most important, look to Jesus. The text says, "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out before us fixing our eyes on Jesus," who is God in the flesh, who at Christmas time, made the ultimate sacrifice, came to earth as a baby, born in a stable, lived a life of poverty, died on a cross to pay the price for your sins and mine. At Christmas, Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice, and it doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense that Jesus would die for a broken, wrecked sinner like me, but sacrifice doesn't always pencil according to the values of our world, and one of the things we may need to sacrifice is the values of this world, because it doesn't always make sense according to the values of this world, and we can't do that without Jesus to give us His wisdom, His courage, His strength. The text says Jesus was willing to endure the cross for the joy set before Him.

And what was that joy that was set before Him? You. You were the joy set before Him. He did all that for you, and the more we experience that and His kind of love, the more willing we become to obey our Lord. The motivation to sacrifice can't just be for the greater joy.

That can be part of the motivation, but that backfires ultimately. The motivation is to obey Jesus because we know He loves us, and because He loves us, He sometimes calls us to sacrificial living because He knows it will lead to a greater joy. I know a man who grew up wanting to be a baseball announcer. In fact, even as a little kid, he would make tapes of himself, announcing imaginary baseball games. He'd make these tapes like he was an announcer, imaginary baseball game.

By the way, if you don't know what tapes are, there will be elders available after the service to explain that to you, those of you are too young. But through a long series of

events, by the time he became an adult, he ended up being a middle school pastor at a church, which was fine, but it wasn't his dream job, so he kept trying to get into broadcasting still. Well, finally, he got a call from a talent scout, who worked for the Denver Nuggets and the Colorado Avalanche, and the talent scout said, "We'd like you to be a stadium announcer for both of these different teams, and would you audition for that?" So he auditioned, and he got both of those jobs, but as he's driving back from the audition, he started to think, "Well, now, this means I have to quit my church job." Then, he said, "Well, that's okay, because that wasn't my dream job anyway," but then, he started to get pictures of all the kids' faces that were in his middle school ministry, and he felt sad at the thought of leaving them.

Then, he got one of those thoughts that he knew wasn't his thought, that came from God and it said, "Jim, I've got you right where I want you," and then he was mad. He actually started to yell at God in the car. He said, "I know. This is my dream job. I'm not going to give up my dream job," but that thought just kept coming for several weeks, so finally, he called them back and said, "I can't take the job. I'm committed to these kids." The talent scout said, "Well, how about if you just announced for one of the teams instead of two?"

"That way, you could keep doing your little boy scout thing," which is what he actually said. That's a direct quote, "Your little boy scout thing." So Jim tried that for a couple of years, but he said, "You know how when you dream about something for a really long time, and you get it, and it doesn't actually satisfy you?" That was his experience. Plus, he was busy all the time.

He was making lots of sacrifices, but he was busy, he wasn't seeing his family, so he and his wife prayed about it, and that voice came back, "Jim, I've got you right where I want you. Stick with the kids." It took him over a month to finally make the call and the final decision. He said he'd think about going to parties, and when he'd said he announced for the Denver nuggets, people would say, "Ooh, tell me more about that," but when he said, "I work with middle school, I'm a pastor, middle school pastor at a church," they'd say things like, "Really? How often?"

Then, one day, he heard God say, "Jim, it'll be okay. Let it go. You can give it up," and he realized that he was sacrificing, and he bought into a bunch of cultural assumptions about what success looked like and the good life looked like, so he quit his announcer job and has never looked back and has never regretted it. He's made great friendships with the youth and with their parents. He's seen students' lives change.

Some of them get off drugs. Students who measure their self-worth by their GPA or their looks find freedom in Jesus. He sacrificed his dream job and a higher-paying job with a lot more social prestige and found a greater joy. Back to that guy that took the middle seat on that flight I was on. As he talked to the people around him in his newfound middle seat, I could tell by the tone of his voice that there was greater joy in him in his

middle seat than there was in me in my aisle seat, because it doesn't always feel good to live only for ourselves, and sacrificing for others carries its own rewards, and in some ways, I do live sacrificially.

In lots of ways, I live sacrificially, and then in other ways, I don't, and I want to do it more, not out of duty or obligation, but to obey the gracious call of my Lord, and also because I know the thing that keeps me from experiencing more of the bigger life Jesus wants to give me is my reluctance to sacrifice even a middle seat sometimes. As a pastor, I have done a lot of memorials, and what makes a great memorial service? The kind where people are sad but inspired, grieving, but grateful. It's not the music, it's not the speakers. What makes a good memorial service is a good life, a well-lived life, because then, that service is not about what they accomplished or all the fun they had.

It's about the lives they changed, which always involves sacrifice. And we only become more of who we are becoming year by year, and people who don't sacrifice for others or make "Sacrifices," but really, it's to advance themselves or their kids. They become resentful, they become self-focused, and as the years go by, complain more and more about smaller and smaller things, but folks who genuinely lay it down for Jesus get more and more joyful year by year. Them. I want to be like them.

I want to be like those first Christians who change the world with their sacrificial love. I want to be like those senior citizens in this church that I told you about, who inspire me because they have been laying it down for Jesus for decades and have changed countless lives. I want to be like them. They inspire me, and when those saints go marching in, I want to be one of them. So Jesus, thank You that You want us to have that bigger, deeper life with that greater joy. So Lord, help us cross through the door of sacrificial living to get there.

Empower us. Help us to trust You. Help us to sacrifice our time, our money, our emotional capacity to serve others, and then Lord, on the other side of that, find that deeper joy, that bigger life that You want to give us. And then, Lord, because of that, help the world know that You live because You're alive in us. We pray this in Your name, Jesus. Amen.

### **Discussion Questions:**

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*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Question:** Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?



**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following (note: we use the same scripture reflection questions each week so that we can practice using the same tools over time as we examine different scriptures):

- What do you feel when you read this scripture (excited, angry, worried, etc....)? Why do you think that is? (Explain in your group and then take that response to Jesus in prayer this week.)
- As you read this scripture, where does it challenge your current cultural context?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- If sacrificial living is the door we walk through to get greater joy, what practical tips does this passage give to help us do that?
- What does it mean to "run with perseverance"? To cast off sin and hinderances?
- What does it mean to "fix our eyes on Jesus"? What helps you do that? Does it help you "run the race" marked out for us? How or how not?

**Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.