

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

Completing Well

Hebrews 12:12-17

12 Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. 14 Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; 16 that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. 17 For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.

I believe it was the spring of 1994 when, after living in Arkansas for just about a year, I experienced my first truly wild and intense severe thunderstorm. The tornado warnings were going off and this Southern California born and bred boy, who would have preferred at the time to endure an earthquake, was faced with what to do with and for his family.

However, as the storm hit, I found myself fascinated by the power of it. Great bursts of lightening, the loudest claps of thunder I have ever heard, gusting winds that would force the trees one direction and then almost instantly turn and force them in the other. I was awed by the display, literally running from window to window exclaiming (and children, this was not the right thing to say): “Holy Cow! Holy Cow!” I was absolutely entranced by the power of the storm and for a few moments, nothing else mattered except watching it and making my profound statement, “Holy Cow!”

Nothing else mattered that is until my then three year old boy, Luke, who had not been watching the spectacle of the storm, but rather the excitement of his gone wild Dad, began to mimic me, running frantically from window to window exclaiming, “Holy Cow! Holy Cow!” All of a sudden and for the first time since becoming a father, I understood the statement, “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree” as Luke was following my example, saying the things that I said; being excited about the things that excited me – in short, he was acting like me. It was as if I had a miniature mirror and for that moment, I saw what I had invested in Luke at the moment. I didn’t like him saying “Holy Cow!” “Where did he get that?” I pondered. I realized at that moment that this tiny little disciple was going to learn how to relate to the world; to others and to God through the things I did and said. “Only God is holy, not some cow,” I explained to my son. “Daddy was wrong for saying that,” I then taught him by my apology.

There is a saying that goes like this, “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.” Well, that is true if what is being imitated is worthwhile, but if what is being imitated is meaningless, empty and perhaps even God-dishonoring, then imitation becomes the sincerest form of disapproval.

As we come this morning to Hebrews 12:12-17 we encounter this preacher continuing to give important instruction concerning how to complete the race of faith well. Verse 12 begins with that wonderful link, **“therefore”** – linking the thoughts began back in verse 1 and running through verse 11 with this next group of exhortations or more simply, these next instructions. This word **“therefore”** calls us to remember what we have considered: because we are in a race (12:1); a race that Jesus Himself has run with endurance so as to be our

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example (12:2-3); a race that includes the constant, active, loving, correcting and guiding instruction/training of the Lord (12:4-11) – then continue in the race, the author says in effect; and as you continue, here are some further instructions that will enable you to complete well; that will ensure that you please God [and listen, as this is the new twist] and will empower you to effectively reach out to others with the example of Jesus as you run. I always like to have a question to answer and the question then that flows from this text before us is this - How does my faith, my example of living for Jesus, affect others?

In our text this morning we find several instructions concerning running and completing the race of faith well that I have grouped into three general exhortations, exhortations I pray we will prayerfully consider and strive to apply as they guide us in this endeavor we call walking in a manner worthy of God (1 Thessalonians 2:12). Let me outline these exhortations. Because we have the great cloud of witnesses and Jesus as examples of living faithful to God; and because we know that the Lord lovingly and active trains and guides His own as sons; therefore, let us...

- I. Run the race of faith reinvigorated (12:12-13)
- II. Run the race of faith resolved (12:14)
- III. Run the race of faith responsibly (12:15-17)

Under each of these headings we will find instructions, directions. We have before us the will and the heart of God. In verses 4-11, if we noted anything last week, we must remember that the Lord is not punishing His children by allowing difficulties, hardship and even sickness, but rather we are to glean that the Lord is actively at work in us. And beginning here in Hebrews 12:12, we see what we are to do in light of the Lord's training. It is not unlike Philippians 2:12-13 -

12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

It is the Lord who is working in us His purposes and His holiness. Now therefore, let us behave, let us live, let us follow after Him in these manners. We will not have time to work through all three, so this morning let us focus our attention on the first two and then next week, we will look carefully the last group of exhortations focusing attention on the life of Esau. So then, if we are to complete the race of faith well, we must...

I. Run the race reinvigorated (12:12-13)

12 Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

The first exhortation is a call to run the race reinvigorated; that is with fresh life and energy. It is actually a veiled quote of Isaiah 35:3, which is calling Israel to endure in light of the promises of the Lord and reads:

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Encourage the exhausted [literally – “slack hands”], and strengthen the feeble [literally “tottering knees”].

In both this text and in Hebrews 12:12 the call is to be reinvigorated. We see this by the use of the first verb in our text, **“strengthen”** – actually a medical term literally meaning “to set aright, to make upright, to set in order for the purpose of reinvigorating or strengthening.” We get our English word “orthopedics” from this Greek verb, orthopedics being the branch of medicine that deals with disorders and injuries to the joints, bones and muscles seeking to set them right. If someone is said to wear orthopedic shoes, it is to set right feet that are otherwise crooked. This word also was used to describe what doctors did in setting right a dislocated joint or bone.

So we have this command to **“strengthen,”** but what is to be strengthened? What are mentioned next are weak hands and feeble knees. Actually, the author is continuing in the race metaphor, as the idea here is of a runner who is losing his form while he runs. **“Hands that are weak”** speaks of drooping or relaxing the hands. A runner who allows his hands to hang by his side, not using them to push his way through his strides will not run effectively. Seeing such a picture is the first sign of a tiring runner. Additionally, **“knees that are feeble”** speaks of the runner’s legs, which at times in a race can on one hand begin to feel like pieces of lead too heavy to lift and on the other hand can begin to weaken so that they hardly seem able to bear the weight of the upper body. That word “feeble” is a word that speaks of becoming paralyzed, unable to move. In fact, Luke, the author of the Gospel that bears his name as well as the book of Acts, uses this word four times (Luke 5:18, 24 and Acts 8:7; 9:23) to describe people who were paralyzed.

One more running illustration is given in verse 13, **“make straight paths for your feet”** – again we have an instruction, a command, to make **“orthos”** - to set straight or proper paths for the feet. As a runner tires, he may begin to stagger and sway, not paying careful attention to the path that he runs, which, oddly enough, would simply make his running all that much harder.

When I was in High School, I ran cross-country for two years. Three times a week the team would run six to twelve miles all over my hometown suburb of San Diego in order to train for a 3.1 miles race. One afternoon for a number of reasons, I experienced the very thing described in our text. I had run about six miles of a ten-mile course. It was hot. I was not necessarily in the best frame of mind and I had not had enough to drink. As I was pounding the pavement past the school, my hands got heavy and were falling to my side. My legs became weak and heavy and my path was weaving back and forth on the sidewalk until - - - the next thing I remember was having water splashed on my face. I had succumbed to heat exhaustion and one of the reason why was because of the way I had allowed myself to run. With the drooping hands I was actually depriving my body of oxygen and as I focused on my heavy and weak knees, my attitude turned pessimistic and in the end, I failed.

Now, what does this picture have to do with running the race of faith? These instructions to strengthen our hands and knees and to make straight paths for our feet – who are they for? Are they for me as a spiritual runner to keep in mind as I run? Or, are they for me as a spiritual coach to encourage others with as they run? Beloved, they are both. We have already noted that every believer in Jesus is “in the race” – but how are you running it?

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My cross-country coach continually reminded the team that half of running was mental – it was remaining focused on rhythm and stride as well as being mindful of where you were in the race; to time your final push and kick not too late nor too early. These are all things that I, as a runner had to keep in mind. As believers, we must constantly keep in mind on our rhythm and stride, keeping pace with spiritual disciplines like prayer, Bible reading and true Christian fellowship. We must keep our focus on the prize, on Jesus Christ, on the joy of Heaven.

But I see these instructions not only to be observed by each one of us for our own personal race, but also as instructions to us as coaches and examples, that we are to observe the races of others and if we see drooping hands, weakening knees or staggering paths, as spiritual coaches and as examples we remind one another how we are to run. When my cross-country team ran our training courses, our coaches would be on bikes, moving up and down the line, watching our forms. Many times I would hear things like – “Godfrey, get those hands up” – or “lengthen that stride.” These were watching my physical race and gave me instructions to complete well. Likewise, I submit to you that we are to watch one another, not for the purpose of judging or condemning, but for the purpose of encouraging true running after the Lord. I know that when my coach gave me some verbal instruction or direction, I found myself reinvigorated, strengthened all the more to run.

But note that there is another purpose for these instructions to watch the running form of ourselves and those running with us. Let us read at the end of verse 13 the “why” we are to strengthen and make straight our race – **“so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather healed.”** Here we have a very evangelistic thought. The idea of this text is this – if you are a believer, make sure that you are continuing to live joyful, Christ-centered lives; because as you do this, others will see the joy and see Jesus and be drawn to Him. But, if you allow your spiritual form and pace to be diminished, if you begin to live and act more and more like the world rather than like Christ, then why would any unbeliever who examines Christianity, be inclined to turn to Christ. In other words, the lame limbs speak of unbelievers who have yet to experience the healing power of God on their souls – and, if our lives are characterized more by grumbling and complaining – if unbelievers see Christians as generally miserable, powerless, timid and ashamed, then why would they ever consider Christ great and living for Christ something to obtain?

Please understand, I know that salvation is the work of God, that the Holy Spirit must regenerate the heart and open the spiritual eyes of a person truly **“salvation is from the Lord”** (Jonah 2:9) – but know this, that the Holy Spirit uses the lives and testimonies of His people to accomplish this. He uses people just like you and me, who are seeking to live in the joy and abundant life of the Lord to reveal the reality of such a life to unbelievers. By our lives, by how we run the race, we are to be testimonies and examples to unbelievers who are looking at the power of Christ in us and prayerfully our lives will encourage them to faith. This is why we must run reinvigorated, with fresh and new life. One of my favorite verses speaks to this very point. In 1 Timothy 4:16 we read –

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Pay close attention [watch carefully] to yourself [your behavior, your life, your form of running the race of faith] and to your teaching [your doctrine, what you believe about God, Jesus Christ, salvation]; persevere [diligently continue] in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself [personal assurance] and for those who hear you [evangelism].

In other words, how you run the race, carefully watching form and faith, practice and precept becomes an evangelistic tool – a means of seeing others come to faith Christ. Let us reinvigorate our faith and the faith of those around us by remembering the testimony of faithful (see Hebrews 11-12:1), the example of Christ (12:2-3) and the loving discipline of the Lord (12:4-11).

II. Run the race resolved (12:14)

The second group of exhortations is found in verse 14 [read text]:

Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

There is a definite connection between this verse and verses 12-13 but rather than a focus on reinvigoration, I see the focus here as resolve. We must run the race resolved. We must have a goal or target in our race. To be sure, a physical runner has the finish line, but what is the finish line for the spiritual racer? We find the answer to that at the end of this verse – to see the Lord.

But unlike a physical runner who runs only with his own finishing in view, the spiritual runner, believers like you are me, are to be encouraging others to finish the race with us. There are two instructions here we must implement into our lives, both built off the command “**pursue**”. The word “**pursue**” is immensely intense and was used to speak of an animal in hot pursuit of its prey. Literally the call here is for believers to run swiftly, purposely and with all resolve in order to catch some person or thing. What are we to pursue? We are instructed in our text to pursue two things in order to ultimately catch people for the glory of God. What an evangelistic description! O that this would be the description of we who are God’s people.

So, what are we are to pursue? First, we are to hotly pursue **peace** – that is rest or right relationships with – note this – “**all men**”. To be sure we are to be in right relationship to other brothers and sisters in Christ, but the emphasis here seems evangelistic – with a view to expose others to the truth concerning faith and Christ. Among the first readers there was a tendency to bicker and quarrel with the Jews in their midst, Jews who were contemplating Christ but still bound to their legalistic Judaism about religion. Rather than lovingly tell them of the superiority of Christ, they might sometimes alienate these weak members who were leaving the straight path of Christ. The call here is to watch attitudes toward the weak and the unbelieving. How quickly we can forget that the natural or earthy mind cannot comprehend or understand the things of God. And so, when the unbeliever argues with us, we must beware of exhibiting one of two inappropriate attitudes. First, we might quarrel and argue with them over his understanding, being hostile rather than honestly and lovingly showing him what the Word says. Second, we might alienate and avoid such a person, thinking that by not

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confronting them, they may somehow come to know the truth. Beloved, how will either of these attitudes cause an unbeliever to want to know Christ. We are to pursue peace with them, to be right with them so that we might speak the truth in love.

In addition to peace, we are to actively pursue **“the sanctification”** – or more simply, the holiness – which I see here as a reference to practical and biblical purity of life. As we run the race of faith, peace, this attitude of wanting to be at rest and right relationship to all men in order to communicate the truth of Christ, must also include a resolve toward “holiness” – the practical living out the purity of life in Christ. What happens as we pursue holiness, this sanctification? Let me share with you a few things as these have a bearing on the purpose to pursuing holiness:

First, true holiness changes our view of life. Before our sanctification, we thought of anything but what God really wanted. As we come to Christ and are changed or made holy, we come to have the mind of Christ. J.C. Ryle, in his book entitled, “Holiness” remarked that “holiness is the habit of being one mind with God, according as we find His mind described in Scripture.”

Second, true holiness excites the soul to godly obedience as we desire to shun every known sin and to keep every known commandment for the glory of God. As the psalmist noted in Psalms 119:128-129

Therefore I esteem right all Your precepts concerning everything, I hate every false way. Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul observes them.

Third, holiness – this pursuit of purity in life according to the Word of God - brings us into conformity with Christ – we become more and more like Jesus. We desire to be like Jesus who did nothing on His own initiative but did only that which He saw His Father doing (John 5:19). This is what it means in Ephesians 5:1 to be imitators of God.

Fourth, holiness brings us to die to sin, to be alive only unto God. J.C. Ryle noted that “a holy man will labor to mortify the desires of his body, to crucify his flesh with his affections and lusts, to curb his passions, to restrain his carnal inclinations, lest at any time they break loose.” Again, a person in pursuit of holiness long for purity of life knowing that his own heart is like tinder, and so he must be diligent to keep clear of any sparks of temptation.

Finally, the pursuit of holiness keeps the believer walking in *humility* so that, again in the words of Ryle, “he will see more evil in his own heart than in any other in the world.”

Why is such a holiness to be pursued? First, because without holiness, no one will see the Lord; and second, because it is by means of such holiness, along with the pursuit of peace, by which God reveals the content and benefit of salvation to unbelievers. If believers and the church are not manifesting the Christian virtues peace and holiness, then – according to the text, **“no one will see the Lord”** - no one will understand and properly relate to the Lord. So then, are you pursuing such peace and holiness in your life? Are you giving it your maximum effort to pursue peace and holiness in your life so that you might reveal the greatness of God to the unbeliever? Is this your resolve – a diligent pursuit of peace and sanctification? Are you seeing holiness in your attitudes, conversations, behaviors, and relationships? How would others evaluate your holiness? I fear that too often believers are big on profession and short on holiness. If we are not pursuing peace and holiness ourselves, we are not Christians. And

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if we are Christians we must press toward holiness – that we might see God and that we might reveal God to unbelievers. May this be our resolve.

Beloved, let us remember that not only is there so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, reminding us of the validity and victory of faith, but that we are also surrounded by so great a cloud of spectators, unbelievers who need to see the reality, the power and benefits of faith. If our lives are not characterized by joy, by trust, by a love for God, His Word and His people, then why would we expect anyone to desire Christ. Let me close this morning by sharing the resolve of Joseph Philpot – may this resolve be our resolve and my this expression of faith reinvigorate our own faith:

My desire is . . .

to exalt the **grace** of God;

to proclaim **salvation** through Jesus Christ alone;

to declare the **sinfulness**, helplessness and

hopelessness of man in a state of nature;

to describe the living experience of the children of God in their . . .

trials, temptations, sorrows, consolations and blessings.

Soli Deo Gloria

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