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PERSEVERANCE, PEACE, AND PURITY

Hebrews 12:12-14

By

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December 26, 2004

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Perseverance, Peace, and Purity
Hebrews 12:12-14

At 7 p.m. on October 20, 1968, a few thousand spectators remained in the Mexico City Olympic Stadium. The last of the exhausted marathon runners were being carried off to the first-aid stations. More than an hour earlier, Mamo Wolde of Ethiopia had crossed the finish line, the winner of the 26.2-mile run.

As the remaining spectators prepared to leave, those sitting near the marathon gates heard the sound of sirens and police whistles. All eyes turned toward the gate. A lone figure wearing the colors of Tanzania entered the stadium. His name was John Stephen Akhwari. He was the last man to finish. His leg bloodied and bandaged, severely injured in a fall, he grimaced with each step as he hobbled around the 400-meter track.

The spectators rose and applauded him as if he were the winner. After crossing the finish line, Akhwari slowly walked off the field. In view of his injury and having no chance of winning a medal, someone asked him why he had not quit. He replied, "My country did not send me 7,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 7,000 miles to finish it" (from *Leadership* [Spring, 1992], p. 49).

In the Christian life, finishing well means everything. As Paul faced execution, he wrote to Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7). Regarding this verse Don Kistler observed (*Soli Deo Gloira* newsletter, 6/03),

As Paul writes to Timothy and contemplates his impending death, he evaluates his life and ministry. While we live in a culture that exalts the winner and scorns the loser, Paul assesses his life based on three things: he fought the good fight, he finished the course, and he kept the faith. How interesting that there is no mention of winning—only that of fighting, finishing, and keeping!

We are so prone to think of ourselves as failures if we don't set records or win so demonstrably as to have monu-

ments built to our endeavors. But for Paul, most likely the greatest Christian who ever lived, it was a matter of endurance. For Paul, he won by lasting.

The author of Hebrews was concerned that some of his readers were about to drop out of the race because they were fainting under God's discipline. "Therefore" (12:12) points back to what he has just said about the need to endure God's discipline because it stems from His love and it is designed "for our good, so that we may share His holiness" (12:10). It also points back to our need to look to the greatest example, Jesus, "who for the joy set before Him endured the cross" (12:2). So the author is exhorting them (and us) to persevere in the Christian marathon, to stay in the race to the end, in spite of weariness or whatever injuries we may have sustained. He tells us that...

To finish the Christian race, persevere in
the pursuit of peace and purity.

The paragraph goes through 12:17, but for the sake of time, we'll save 12:15-17 for next week. Our text brings up three matters: perseverance (12:12-13); peace, and purity (12:14).

1. We must persevere to finish the Christian race: Don't quit (12:12-13)!

Isaiah 35:3 (NIV) reads, "Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way" (see also, Job 4:3-4). When a runner is going strong, his hands move vigorously with every stride, but when he is exhausted, they droop to his side. A severely exhausted runner buckles at the knees, so that his trainers have to carry him off the course. That's the picture behind our text. There are three practical lessons here:

- A. Perseverance is a mark of every true believer.

This is the great truth of Scripture, that those whom God saves, He keeps. Many verses teach this, but here are three of the strongest texts:

Philippians 1:6: For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

John 10:27-30: [Jesus is speaking]: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

Romans 8:29-30: For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

Paul continues the same theme to the end of that great chapter, arguing that if God did the greatest thing for us by not sparing His own Son, then nothing can separate us from His great love. It is a wonderful truth that God gives to His weak and struggling children for their assurance.

However, this doctrine is often misunderstood and misapplied. For example, some use this truth to give assurance to those who have professed Christ as Savior, but who have no evidence that God has changed their hearts. Sometimes it is phrased, "once saved, always saved." That's a true phrase, but the key question is, "Was this person *once saved*?" The parable of the sower teaches that it's possible to make a profession of faith and even to exhibit some signs of new life (such as the seed on the rocky ground and thorny ground). But only the seed that "bears fruit with perseverance" (Luke 8:15) is genuinely saved.

Take the case of Johnny, who accepted Christ at camp at age ten. For a while, things seemed to go well. But in his teens, he began to rebel against his parents. He showed no interest in the things of God. He dropped out of church, started doing drugs and sleeping with any willing girl. He angrily resists any attempts to talk to him about his spiritual condition. It is crucial to ask, "Was Johnny *truly* saved? Is there any evidence that God changed Johnny's heart?" If not, it would be a mistake to deal with Johnny as if he were saved. A decision to "accept Christ" is not necessarily the same as genuine conversion, in which God changes the heart.

Another way this doctrine is misunderstood is to think that perseverance is automatic and effortless for those who are truly saved. This person mistakenly thinks, "Since God saved me by His grace and He has promised to keep me by His grace, I don't have to do anything to persevere." This line of thinking ignores the many biblical passages, including our text, which exhort us to exert ourselves to persevere.

After listing several qualities that we need to add to our faith, Peter concludes, "Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you" (2 Pet. 1:10-11). Even though God chose you for salvation, you must be diligent to persevere in godly living. God predestined us to be conformed to the image of Christ, but He also chose the means for us to arrive at that goal, namely, that we "run with endurance the race set before us" (Heb. 12:1). It is *not* an automatic process!

B. To persevere, we must deal with weariness and injuries in the race.

Weariness and injuries are inevitable in this lifelong race. The implication is, it's *not* going to be easy to finish the course. The crucial question is, "Will you drop out because of the hardships or will you deal with the problems and keep running?" If you drop out, you need to examine whether you are truly saved.

Like that Olympic runner, true Christians finish the course. They may be limping and hurting with every step, but they cross the finish line, looking unto Jesus. They don't quit because they're tired or hurt. As the author said (Heb. 3:14), "For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end."

In an actual race, the runner has to deal both with mental and physical hindrances. If the runner becomes mentally discouraged, he loses the motivation to keep going. Physically, he may turn his ankle or develop blisters or experience joint pain. He may have to stop at a rest station and deal with these problems in order to finish the race. But then he keeps going.

Spiritually, it is the same. We must battle in the realm of the spirit to overcome discouragement and to maintain hope and joy. Paul commands us to “keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1-2). That can be a constant, hour-by-hour battle, depending on the intensity of the problems we are facing!

Also, we need to recognize that some spiritual battles are related to physiological problems. Some illnesses and injuries make us prone to depression. Some are more prone to discouragement, depression, or anger because of either biochemistry or issues in their background. You'll need to fight harder for the joy that the Bible promises to all who walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

The appeal of our text is, “Deal with spiritual weariness and injuries so that they don't put you out of the race!” F. F. Bruce (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], pp. 363-364) writes, “Sprains and similar injuries must be bound up, so that the whole community may complete the course without loss.” Verse 13 probably has in mind Proverbs 4:25-27:

Let your eyes look directly ahead and let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you. Watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established. Do not turn to the right nor to the left; turn your foot from evil.

The idea is, “Don't get off course or let your eyes veer off to tempting short cuts. Just stay obediently on the course that God has set for you, so that your limb that is feeling lame will not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.” Spiritual healing is promised if we will persevere in obedience. That requires constantly dealing with our attitude, by setting our eyes on the Lord and the finish line, when we will be forever with Him.

Perseverance is a mark of every true believer. To persevere, you must deal with weariness and injuries in the race. Third,

C. To persevere, we must help each other in running the race.

The wording of this exhortation allows it to be applied both individually and corporately. He doesn't say, “Strengthen *your own* weak hands and knees,” although we must do that. Rather,

“strengthen the hands and knees that are weak,” whether yours or someone else’s. You may need to come alongside your brother and help him wrap his sore joints. The word translated “*make straight paths* for your feet” comes from a word meaning, *wheel tracks*. The idea is that we’re leaving tracks for others to follow in. Make sure that your life stays on the course so that someone else doesn’t follow you off course and be disqualified from the race. We aren’t running this race alone, or competing against each other. We’re all on the same team, and we need to encourage one another by our words and example to finish the course.

“But,” we may wonder, “what exactly is the course that we must run? How can we know where it goes?” In 12:14-17, he shows the path which we are to pursue. For now, we can only deal with verse 14.

2. We must pursue peace and purity to finish the Christian race: Stay on course (12:14)!

The course entails the two great commandments. Pursuing “peace with all men” is the second commandment, to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). To pursue “the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord” is the first commandment, to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37). Jesus links these two themes (in reverse order) in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matt. 5:8, 9).

The link between pursuing peace *and* sanctification shows that we must not pursue peace at any cost. As Paul puts it (Rom. 12:18), “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” His words imply the reality of living in this fallen world, that sometimes it is not possible to be at peace with everyone. Sometimes the other person clings to bitterness and hatred, and you can’t do anything more than you’ve done to be reconciled. At other times, to make peace would require compromising obedience to God, either morally or doctrinally. You can’t sacrifice personal holiness or commitment to God’s truth for the sake of peace. But, whenever you can do so without compromise, the race set before us includes pursuing both peace with others and purity before God.

A. Pursue peace with all men.

“All men” includes all those within the church, but also those outside the church, even if they are persecuting you. As Jesus said (Luke 6:27-28), “. . . love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” Those are not easy words to obey! They apply to wives who have husbands who verbally abuse them. They apply to believers who have family members who ridicule their faith or provoke them in an attempt to get them to deny their testimony. They apply to Christian teenagers whose parents are godless and verbally abusive. They apply to Christians who work with people who hate them for their faith, who spread falsehoods about them behind their backs.

Perhaps the most difficult place to apply these words, however, is toward fellow Christians who wrong you. We expect the world to act like the world. When unbelievers are verbally abusive or slander you, you tend to think, “Well, that’s the way unbelievers act!” But, when Christians do that, we’re shocked. We expect that from pagans, but we don’t expect that from fellow Christians! But it happens all the time, and it’s one of Satan’s most effective tools to sideline new believers: Get somebody in the church to spread nasty rumors or to say insensitive things about this new believer. Watch the new believer drop out of the race!

But, rather than dropping out, the author says that we must *pursue* peace with all men. *Pursue* is a strong word that means, in some contexts, “to persecute.” It means to go after peace with the effort that a hunter tracks down his prey. It implies concentrated effort. It won’t happen accidentally.

When someone hurts you, your tendency is to withdraw and lick your wounds. Put up a wall of protection around yourself, especially toward that mean person, so that it never happens again. Distance yourself from the one who hurt you and from everyone who believed that person’s cruel lies. Avoid talking to them. But, the author says, “*Pursue* peace with that person!”

This isn’t the only time in the New Testament that we are told to pursue peace. In Romans 14:19, Paul says, “So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” Many manuscripts make it a command, “Let us pursue. . . .”

Also, 1 Peter 3:11, citing Psalm 34:14, says that the one who desires life and loves to see good days (3:10), “must turn away from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it.” In 2 Timothy 2:22, Paul tells Timothy, “Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”

Do you practice this command? Rather than withdrawing and nursing your hurt feelings, do you make an effort to *pursue* peace with those who have hurt you? Start with your immediate family members. Husbands and wives, do you pursue peace with each other when your mate has said or done something to hurt your feelings? Parents and kids, do you make an effort to clear up misunderstandings and angry words? Extend it to those in this church: Do you go to those who have wronged you and seek to clear up the wrongs? Don't go with the assumption, “I'm right and you were a complete jerk!” Go with humility, asking, “Did I cause offense? I don't want there to be anything between us. Can we get this cleared up?” It's not usually a pleasant part of the race, but it is the course God has set before us: “Pursue peace with all men.”

B. Pursue the purity without which no one will see the Lord.

The NASB uses “sanctification,” but that doesn't alliterate with peace as *purity* does! Some versions use “holiness.” The idea is, moral purity, both inwardly and outwardly. It points to a heart that is growing in conformity with God's standards of purity or holiness. As Jesus pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount, moral purity must begin on the heart level. Adultery, in God's sight, is not just the physical act, but also the lust of the heart (Matt. 5:27-30). Jesus indicated that if a man will not judge his lust on the thought level, his whole body will be thrown into hell! That is what our text means when it says, “without which no one will see the Lord.” It means, if you're not growing in sanctification (purity), you will not go to heaven!

We need to clarify that with two things. First, *it does not mean that we earn heaven by our righteous behavior.* The Bible is abundantly clear that heaven is God's free gift to all that trust in Christ as Savior and Lord (Rom. 6:23). Second, *it does not mean that anyone can be perfectly holy or sanctified in this life.* Some Christians teach that believers can achieve a state of sinless perfection or total sanctification in

this life. But the Bible is clear that we must strive against indwelling sin as long as we live (Heb. 12:4; Gal. 5:16-17; Rom. 8:12-13).

So, what does our text mean? It means that *those whose hearts have been regenerated by God's grace will pursue a course of purity or holiness* (1 Cor. 6:9-11; Eph. 5:3-11; Col. 3:5-8; 1 John 3:7-10). They may sin often, but they do not remain in sin. They hate it, they confess it and turn from it, and they fight against it with the spiritual weapons that God provides (Eph. 6:10-20). They build into their lives safeguards to avoid sin. They renew their minds through Scripture, hiding God's word in their hearts, so that they might not sin against Him (Ps. 119:11). It is a lifelong pursuit, but without it, no one will see the Lord. They won't go to heaven!

Heaven will be a place of absolute holiness. God is holy, surrounded by His holy angels, who cover their faces and proclaim, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts" (Isa. 6:3). The saints in heaven are all perfectly holy, never to sin again. If you're not pursuing a course of holiness now, you'd be awfully uncomfortable in such a holy place, not to mention the fact that you'd ruin it! So everyone who has been rescued from sin and judgment by the cross wants to please the Lord who died for him by pursuing purity.

Conclusion

Florence Chadwick was the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions. On July 4, 1952, she attempted to swim from Catalina Island to the California coast. The challenge is not only the distance, but also the bone-chilling water. To complicate matters, a dense fog lay over the entire area, making it impossible for her to see land. After about 15 hours in the water, and within a half mile of her goal, Chadwick gave up. Later, she told a reporter, "Look, I'm not excusing myself. But if I could have *seen* land, I might have made it" ("Our Daily Bread," 11/81).

Our reward is, one day soon we will see the Lord. Now we are to look to Him by faith. In spite of the difficulties of the course, don't give up. Persevere in the pursuit of peace with all and purity before God!

Discussion Questions

1. If only those who persevere are true believers, how can we know, short of dying in the faith, if our faith is genuine?
2. What are some biblical ways to deal with weariness in the Christian race?
3. How can we know whether to overlook an offense or to pursue peace by trying to work through the offense?
4. The text says that without sanctification, "no one will see the Lord." Yet, we can't be perfectly sanctified in this life. How do we reconcile this? When are we sanctified enough for heaven?

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