

Hebrews

Perseverance, Peace, and Purity

Hebrews 12:12-14

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INTRODUCTION:

ILLUSTRATION:

The date was October 20, 1968 at 7 p.m. in the evening. 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 was bloodied and bandaged. It had been severely injured in a fall! John 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, he slowly walked off the field. As he was leaving someone asked him, considering his injury and the fact that he had **no chance of winning a medal**, 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”.

In the Christian life, finishing well means everything. As Paul faced execution, listen to what he wrote to Timothy.

2 Timothy 4:7 (NASB95)

⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;

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 do not **set records** or **win so decisively** that they build monuments of us to commemorate our endeavors. But for Paul, who would be among a very small group of one the greatest Christians who ever lived, it was a matter of endurance. For Paul, he won by **finishing** the race using the best of his ability.

All Stand and Read Scripture

Hebrews 12:12-14 (NASB95)

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.

Prayer

In verse 12 of our text, the author of Hebrews was concerned that **some** of his readers were about to drop out of the race because they did not understand the value of God's discipline in their lives. They were inclined to attribute, what seemed to be their misfortunes, to a God who did not care or lacked the power to help them in their times of distress.

He begins verse 12 with the word “**Therefore**”.

So what is the word "therefore" "there for"?

It is pointing back to verse 10 where he has just exhorted us of the need to endure God's discipline.

Why? Because the discipline that God places upon us is due to His **perfect** fatherly love for us. Listen, once again, to the comparison between our earthly father and our heavenly Father.

Hebrews 12:10 (NASB95)

¹⁰ For they (our earthly fathers) disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He (our heavenly Father) *disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.*

"Therefore" also refers back to our greatest example of living a disciplined life. Back in verse 2 it shows us Jesus “**who for the joy set before Him endured the cross**”. 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 because it is for our good. It allows us to “**share his holiness**”. It is **only** when we persevere in the lifelong race in front us that we can have our sin replaced with His righteousness.

So in verses 12-17 of this chapter, the author is going to teach us how to persevere in this race. For the sake of time, we will have to save verses 15-17 for next week. The first three verses of this section brings up three codes of behavior that we must exhibit in order to finish the race: perseverance, peace, and purity.

BODY:

I. We Must Persevere to Finish the Christian Race: Don't quit!

Hebrews 12:12-13 (NASB95)

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 author of Hebrews is alluding to Old Testament passages such as Isaiah and Job.

Isaiah 35:3 (NIV)

³ Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;

Job 4:3-4 (NASB95)

³ Behold, you have taught many, And you have strengthened weak hands. ⁴ Your words have helped the stumbling to stand, And you have strengthened feeble knees.

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 is the picture behind our text. There are three practical lessons here:

A. Perseverance is a Mark of Every True Believer.

The one common thread throughout scripture is that the mark of every **true** believer is that we persevere in the lifelong race in front of us. Many believers believe 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 do not 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.

Let me show you some examples.

1 Corinthians 15:1-2 (NASB95)

¹⁵ Now I make known to you, brothers *and sisters*, the gospel which I preached to you, which you also received, in which you also stand, ² by which you also are saved, **if** you hold firmly to the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

Colossians 1:21-23 (NASB95)

²¹ And although you were previously alienated and hostile in attitude, *engaged* in evil deeds, ²² yet He has now reconciled you in His body of flesh through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach— ²³ **if** indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

Revelation 2:10 (NASB95)

¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. **Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.**

Listen to what Peter's final exhortation was to his readers after listing several qualities that we need to add to our faith.

2 Peter 1:10-11 (NASB95)

¹⁰ Therefore, brothers *and sisters*, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choice of you; **for as long as you practice these things**, you will never stumble; ¹¹ for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.

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**”. 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 is **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?”

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 do not quit because they are tired or hurt.

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...

Colossians 3:1-2 (NASB95)

3 Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things *that are above*, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on the things *that are above*, not on the things that are on earth.

This can be a constant, hour-by-hour battle, depending on the intensity of the problems we are facing!

The idea is, “Do not get off course by allowing encumbrances to hold you back 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 with Him for eternity.

So perseverance is a mark of every true believer and in order 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 does not **just** say, “Strengthen **your own** weak hands and knees”. Rather, “**strengthen the hands and knees that are weak**,” whether yours or those of someone else. 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 are leaving tracks for others to follow in. Make sure that your life stays on the course so that someone else does not follow you off course and be disqualified from the race. We are not running this race alone, or competing against each other. We are 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.

II. We Must Pursue Peace and Purity to Finish the Christian Race: Stay On Course!

Hebrews 12:14 (NASB95)

¹⁴ Pursue **peace** with all men, and the **sanctification** without which no one will see the Lord.

The first two qualities that we must exhibit to stay on course entails the two great commandments. Pursuing “**peace with all men**” is the second commandment, to “**love your neighbor as yourself**”. To pursue “**the sanctification** (or the holiness that God promised to us when we accept God's discipline for our good back in verse 10) **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**”. It is only through sanctification or God's holiness in our life that we can be His children.

Jesus links these two themes (in reverse order) in the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:8-9 (NASB95)

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

A. Pursue Peace with All Men.

The phrase “**All men**” not only 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 (NASB95)

²⁷ “But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who are abusive to you.

These 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, but when believers are verbally abusive or slander you, you tend to think, “That is the way **unbelievers** act, not Christians!” But it happens all the time, and it is 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 and watch the new believer drop out of the race!

But, rather than chasing another believer away from his faith, the author says that we must **pursue** peace with **all** men. **Pursue** is a strong word that means that we should pursue peace with the effort that a hunter tracks down his prey. It implies concentrated effort. It will not happen accidentally.

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? If someone in the church has wronged you do you seek to clear up the wrongs? Do not go with the assumption, "I am right and he was a complete jerk!" Go with humility and seek peace with the offender. It is 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.

Hebrews 12:14 (NASB95)

¹⁴ Pursue **peace** with all men, and the **sanctification** without which no one will see the Lord.

The link between pursuing peace **and** sanctification shows that we must not pursue peace at any cost. This is how Paul describes this union:

Romans 12:18 (NASB95)

¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all people.

His words imply the reality of living in this fallen world. Sometimes it is not possible to be at peace with everyone. Sometimes the other person clings to bitterness and hatred, and you cannot do anything more than you have done to be reconciled. At other times, to make peace would require compromising obedience to God, either morally or doctrinally. You cannot 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.

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.

Romans 6:23 (NASB95)

²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Second, **it does not mean that anyone can be perfectly holy or sanctified in this life on their own..** The Bible is clear that we must strive against indwelling sin as long as we live.

Galatians 5:16-17 (NASB95)

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desire of the flesh is against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, in order to keep you from doing whatever you want.

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.** They may sin often, but they do not remain in sin. They

hate it, they confess it, and they turn from it. They fight against it with the spiritual weapons that God provides. They renew their minds through Scripture, hiding God's word in their hearts, so that they might not sin against Him. It is a lifelong pursuit that we must follow if we are going to be with God for eternity in heaven!

Heaven will be a place of absolute holiness. The saints in heaven are all perfectly holy. They will never to sin again. If you are not pursuing a course of holiness now, you would be tremendously uncomfortable in such a holy place. 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:

ILLUSTRATION:

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".

We must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Now we look to Him by faith. If we persevere, we will be able to see the Lord face to face in all of His glory as our reward. In spite of the difficulties of the course, do not give up. Persevere in the pursuit of peace with all and purity before God!

What a Day That Will Be!