

The Spiritual Path

Our modern-day world is so quick to equate suffering with bad or evil. We think that the ultimate goal in life is prosperity and comfort by the material things we gain and possess. The world chases money as the solution to all ones needs. Money is not the problem; it is a tool that can be used for family and the kingdom, the problem is when money becomes an idol. I will make some broad-brush statements about America and not any person in specific. Another problem for Americans, is when we enter into suffering, no matter the form, there is a pill readily available to help take the edge off. According to a 2016 article by CNBC “Approximately 80 percent of the global opioid supply is consumed in the United States” while our population is only 5% of the world’s. Americans want to avoid pain, any pain, at any cost. The problem is America as a country is rapidly moving away from God and this is making it difficult for people to live with the good and bad times of life because of their sin they are broken. I also want to be clear, Chronic pain is different from the temporary pains of life. For those who desire not to experience any pain - could it be they cannot handle experiencing life and want to numb themselves to living. The use of drugs of all forms and kinds is increasing every year as people struggle to cope. Could it be that for some they are working against the Holy Spirit when they take pills for depression for example. If one suffers from depression, then should ask themselves why? Depression is real and the problem can be medical and chemical imbalance, but studies show a great percentage of those suffering with depression is caused by the inability to cope with everyday life. The answer is simple, the solution for many is simple – people

need Christ and the power of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. People need to seek the answer that will result in their ability to live life fully; the answer is Christ. Ask yourself what is the Lord telling you and showing you and teaching you during these dreary days of a world in chaos. By medicating oneself with pills or other drugs, they may miss what God is doing, therefore prolonging their misery.

Last week, we learned that pain, can be, not hatred from God but the love of God to bring us to repentance and correction. We know from last week's text that God disciplines those He loves just as parents discipline their children out of love. For those who God has called to salvation and have chosen Jesus as their Lord and Savior, we are not enemies with God but sons and daughters of God. He is not punishing us as judgment but disciplining us for our good.

Spiritual Endurance

A key principle found in last weeks and today's text is; *As believers running the marathon of the Christian life with endurance, we must seek holiness and peace with God and with one another.* The foundation of this principle was found in last week's text verses 5 to 8 where the writer cites Proverbs chapter 3, "have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? *'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.'* (Proverbs 3:11-12) ⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons." This is an important text of Scripture. Last week we learned how to think about God's discipline. We saw that He only disciplines us because we are sons and daughters and He is our heavenly Father. If one's life is

absent of discipline it brings into question the focus and purpose of one's life. If one thinks they are good and have no need for discipline and repentance then is evidence of a self-deluding problem.

One point I want to make very clear this morning before we launch into this text, is that as believers, we should never think of God's discipline as punishment. God never punishes one of His children. Sometimes we can think of God apart from grace that we think we will be punished for sin. Jesus Christ was punished for our sin. He alone paid for our sin debt. God will not punish the same sin twice. The wrath of God that His children had accumulated by their sins before Christ and sins that continue as one lives as His child were laid on Christ and He atoned for each and every one. Those sins we have committed and ones we will commit have been punished already. As the writer of Hebrews already made clear in his writing concerning Jesus' sacrifice, ["But as it is, Jesus has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."](#)²⁷ ["And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,"](#)²⁸ ["so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."](#)^(Hebrews 9:26-28) So, what this means to us as believers is that as we suffer and when we ask God questions like, "Why is this happening to me"? We can automatically know that God has designed that we walk through whatever struggle it is so that when we come out on the other side, we will be stronger spiritually and more mature believers and He will receive more glory.

The text before us today is a command for believers to do something because and only because Christ has already done something. His work on the cross for His children has changed everything. His death has changed the penalty death for believers. Paul wrote using the writing of Isaiah and Hosea as his

foundation,⁵³ “For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.”⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ *(Isaiah 25:8)*⁵⁵ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ *(Hosea 13:14)*⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” *(1 Corinthians 15:53-58)* Jesus’ death has transformed death of darkness to death of light for His people. His suffering, likewise, has changed suffering for His people. Just as our death only brings about good things, so our suffering only brings about good things. Safety consists not in the absence of danger but in the presence of God.

This text of Scripture before us today is important. This text shows us that proper theology must lead to and result in proper practice. In other words, what God is after is not ultimately for us to understand just by truth but by gaining understanding through our faith and our deepening faith leads us to action – a life lived for God’s glory. That is why this section of Scripture in Hebrews 12, verses 12 to 17 begins with “**Therefore**”. The writer is saying, therefore, based on all that has been said so far in the Book of Hebrews, do the following ...

Let me give a simple illustration; it is sort of like putting together something using the instructions. Maybe you have experienced this, it is the night before Christmas and you are planning to assemble the new bicycle for your child. That is the first mistake, never wait until the night before. But imagine you did wait and now you look to the instruction sheet, read through it and you understand what it says and the process of the steps for assembling and completing the bicycle.

However, instead of beginning to assemble the bicycle, you never open the box and it just sits there under the tree. There is a box of parts not a functioning bike. Understand the instruction sheet is not why it was produced. It was written to be used to assemble the bicycle. Simply understanding the Bible is not the primary purpose for why it was written. God inspired the Bible to be written as an instruction sheet for glorifying Christ. Once you read it, it should determine how one thinks about God and how one is determined to live and equipping one with the living out or to the proper assembling of a biblical worldview and that view of the world given by God leads believers to action.

If we do not take action, our salvation is not real because our faith is not real, for if it were real, it would cause us to change the way we think and act in the living out of our faith. Understand, as believers, we are not taking action to earn anything or to get God to do something; we take action because God has already done something that changed everything and our heart's desire is for His glory.

Because our suffering is ordained by God for our good, He wants us to take action to strengthen what is already there. The imagery of a marathon race run with endurance is still in the mind of the writer of Hebrews. We take action because God has taken action in us already. However, to be honest, there are times when we become spiritually weak and are almost ready to quit, just as these readers, who were converted from Judaism to Christianity living as the first century church.

I think with the foundation laid, we can now build upon it as we study Hebrews chapter 12, verses 12 to 17. Let me begin our preparation in prayer.

Spiritual Power (vs. 12-13)

The apostle begins, ¹² “Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.” We understand from last week’s message that we are running the Christian endurance race of life. There is a great cloud of witnesses is cheering us on. We know Christ is at the finish line waiting for us. But our strength is all but spent. Like the Hebrews to which this epistle was written had all but come to the end of all their endurance, we too, at times, are spiritually tired and weak. The situation is this; your arms are hanging to your side; you cannot lift them any longer. Your legs are like rubber and you feel it is impossible to keep running. You are also weaving back and forth from exhaustion. What do you do? Quitting is not an option. What do you do?

To understand what the writer is getting at, we must see where these verses come from. He cites the Old Testament for us and is coaching us to do what it says. It is as if the Holy Spirit is running beside us telling us what to do to gain the spiritual strength, we need to keep on going in the race. Do you remember the story of the Hebrews defeating Amalek? Reading from Exodus chapter 17, ⁸ “Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. ⁹ So Moses said to Joshua, ‘Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.’ ¹⁰ So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. ¹¹ **Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed.** ¹² **But Moses’ hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun.** ¹³ And Joshua overwhelmed

Amalek and his people with the sword.” Here is an example of knowing our success is by the power of God and our lives are to be lived for His glory. Aaron and Hur came along side of Moses and supported him. For us, as those who believe in Jesus as the Christ, He sent the Holy Spirit to dwell within each believer to strengthen them and He created the Church for believers to strengthen each other in faith. When we rely on the Holy Spirit the result will be the ability to “lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees,¹³ and make straight paths for your feet.” Even the Prophet Isaiah knew what God would do when one relied upon Him and his writing may have been the source for what was written here in Hebrews chapter 12, verse 12, “They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.³ Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.⁴ Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.”

(Isaiah 35:2-4)

The words of Solomon in Proverbs may have inspired the writer to pen verse 13,²⁵ “Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you.²⁶ Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure.²⁷ Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.” (Proverbs 4:25-27) Immediately we see that spiritual strength comes from God and our stride strengthens and becomes straight as we run straight to Christ. I believe this is what Isaiah saw as God spoke to his heart, so he tells the Israelites,²⁸ “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.²⁹ He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.³⁰ Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted;³¹ but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with

wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

(Isaiah 40:28-31) God gives power to His children to deal with living in a broken world. Without God where is there hope? There is none. Without God either one serves the evil one or is a victim of the world’s evil and their worldly hope fails. Is it any wonder by there is so much struggle and depression when people live without Christ?

Spiritual Peace and Holiness (v. 14)

So far, we have been told in Chapter 12 to let go of the sin that so easily entangles us. We have been told to look to Christ. Now we are told what to pursue. Reading verse 14, “**Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.**” Here we are told to pursue peace with others and holiness. It is these two things; peace and holiness which give us spiritual strength to endure the race.

First, we seek to live in peace with everyone. Some folks strive for peace in the sense that it is peace at all costs. Do we allow people to have their way all the time so that we can live at peace with them? No, of course not. Pursuing peace at all costs only encourages bullies. Peace must be had in context. We only truly can live in peace with others as we center that peace in the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ and His gospel. We can only truly be united with others when it is through Christ.

The writer has in mind the community of believers living in unity and peace as they together look to Christ. The writer is not addressing the world at large. I found this interesting statistic from 1988, published by the Moody Bible Institute, *Today In The Word*, June, 1988, p.33, “**The Personnel Journal reported this incredible statistic: since the beginning of recorded history, the entire world**

has been at peace less than eight percent of the time! In its study, the periodical discovered that of 3530 years of recorded history, only 286 years saw peace. Moreover, in excess of 8000 peace treaties were made--and broken.” The world does not know peace because it does not know Christ.

The writer also commands God’s people to pursue holiness. There is a sense in which believers are holy and set apart for a purpose at salvation. Jesus prayed to God the Father, ¹⁰ “All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. ¹¹ And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³ But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. ¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.” (John 17:10-15) Jesus is saying believers are capable of peace with each other because they are called to set aside their ambition and goals for their own gain and strive for the Will of God lived out in obedience to Christ. Because of this, believers will never be accepted by the world and we need to remember the world hates all that is holy.

The Bible teaches we are to seek peace with fellow believers and this means that living in peace and holiness is a life-long process by which we submit our will to the will of God. By pursuing peace through Christ and by pursuing holiness in Christ we find our spiritual legs to be strengthened and we begin to run straight, we

run with endurance and we run in community. Disunity and unholiness weakens our endurance, it weakens Christ's Church and in truth, dishonors God.

Spiritual Grace (vs. 15-17)

The next thing presented in our study passage, is the writer reminds us how important the local church is. Reading at verse 15, “See to it that no one fails to obtain the **grace of God**; that no ‘**root of bitterness**’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; ¹⁶ that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.” Verse 15 is saying that together as a community, as a church of Christ we pursue peace with each other and we help each other. Because my weakness is not yours and yours is not mine, we can strengthen each other and help each not to give into sin and encourage each other to continue in the race. When one stumbles, we pick them up and help them get back in the race. Another way to say it, is as a church we are our brother's keeper. Every member is to keep watch over every other member. The local church must function as a safe haven for God's grace. This is the responsibility of the elders in the church. The elders function as guards of the flock of the church Christ has given, they are to guard people spiritually, to guide people spiritually and build people spiritually stronger based of the Word of God. This why Christ says the flock needs to submit to the authority of the elders – it is for their spiritual health. The writer addressed this back in chapter 13, ¹⁷ “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” Being an elder is serious, because they will have to give an account to God. Helping each other spiritually is not limited to the elders. In this

Christian race of endurance, we are all to look out for those around us and who part of the family of this church to help each other avoid the dangers of this world and obtain the grace of God.

Remember when someone has unjustly hurt you God commands us to forgive them. Why would God do that? Because if you develop a root of bitterness, you allow that person to have a piece of your heart. You cannot control their behavior, so forgive and let them go. Maybe the comedian Buddy Hackett understood, he said, “I’ve had a few arguments with people but I never carry a grudge. You know why? While you’re carry a grudge, they’re out dancing.” If you will not let go your they grudge will be always on your mind and the person you will not forget has not lost a moments sleep.

We are to protect each other and build each other up spiritually to deal with the fallen corrupt world, but what about within the church? A few dangers that are addressed in verses 15 and 16, ‘root of bitterness’, ‘sexual immortality’ and unholiness. Any of these that is not dealt with properly will damage the people and Christ’s church. All people, including God’s children have a propensity to gossip and elevate themselves over others, thus resulting in people harboring a root of bitterness. We can in some ways be the opposite of an oyster. An oyster takes a gain of sand and turns it into a beautiful pearl. Too often people take pearls and turn them into gains of sand. The writer uses the illustration of Esau. As far as we can determine Esau’s problem was not sexual immorality. His problem was that he traded God’s blessing for a bowl of stew. So, his problem was not sexual adultery but spiritual adultery. He desired to meet his immediate physical hunger over living with God’s spiritual blessing. Esau was only concerned with the material things of the world. Esau chose the world over God.

Because of the choices Esau made he lived his life despising the things of God. The consequence of his choices was he embraced the world and separated himself from God. At the end Esau refused to repent and God blessed Isaac and then his son Jacob. As a church we are to look out for each other. If we notice someone beginning to care too much for the world and this causes their love for God to lessen, we need to lovingly speak with them and begin to pray for them. Sometimes we do not see what is in one's heart – so, for those who are struggling spiritually privately – do not let it continue, reach out to someone within the church family that loves you and let them help, ask them to pray, let them speak into your life. Do not allow your private struggles to take you down the path of depression.

My beloved, our God, has given us a wonderful gift, He has given us, as His children, to each other as the family of Christ. Do not squander this precious gift. Always think the best of your brothers and sisters in Christ, do not carry roots of bitterness but seek peace and forgiveness, as Christ, out of love has forgiven you. Amen!