Strength for your life as you focus on Christ

*When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him.*

Matthew 5:1

When Jesus saw the crowds of people following Him, He went up the side of a mountain. This was not to get away from them, but to be more accessible. They would be able to hear His teaching better if His voice would be able to flow down the mountain side.

Jesus sat down. This was the traditional position of a teacher at that period of history in that culture. When Jesus sat, the people knew He was about to teach them; they knew that He would have something important to say to them. Again we see Jesus trying to be accessible to them. It was an invitation to come to Him.

But also notice that His disciples came *to* Him. Although our salvation in no way depends on our works, we must still accept the invitation He gives us. When He sits on the mountain to teach, we come up with Him. If He knocks, we must open the door. He calls to us, but we must answer.

Our strength and faith to respond to the summons of Jesus is a gift of the Holy Spirit, but we must accept that gift. It is a hard thing, but we can lay no claim to our own salvation; it is all by the work of God. At the same time, we must respond.

If you have responded with rejoicing to the invitation of Jesus; give all the glory and thanksgiving to God.

In Christ’s love

John

2-19-23

Hebrews 12:1-17

As we study this section of the letter to the Hebrews, we have been focusing on discipline. Discipline is an extremely important concept in God’s word. So far, we have considered how necessary it is to have self-discipline. And in the Christian life, our self-discipline must be enabled and guided by the Holy Spirit. Our lives need to be immersed in Bible study, prayer, and fellowship with the rest of God’s children. Self-discipline also involves recognizing temptation and then resisting it.

Next we looked at the discipline imposed by the Lord. His discipline includes simply training us and giving us instruction. He wants us to be holy like He is. We are to be a nation of priests; of servants of Christ our King. To do this we must be set apart from the rest of the world and away from worldly ways of living.

The Almighty will also discipline us if we stray from Him. We will receive correction in the form of suffering. Just as our natural fathers would correct us if we disobeyed them. The difference is that God always disciplines us perfectly and it will always be to bring us closer to Him and make us more like our Saviour Jesus. It is God’s aim to make us holy. It is for our good and will bring Him glory.

Verse 11 freely admits that discipline seems unpleasant as we are going through it. Suffering is not fun. But in this fallen world, with our fallen natural inclination to evil, suffering is the way we are best kept in line and best taught. As we focus on Christ in our suffering, we see how it has trained us and taught us perseverance. And for those who are in Christ, it will lead to that peaceful fruit of righteousness.

We are covered in the righteousness of Christ when we come to believing faith in Him, and then throughout our lives we are formed more and more into His likeness. When we finally stand before Him, we will be like Him. This is the righteousness we need to be at peace with God. God wants to have peace with us; remember, He wants to spend eternity with us and it is His desire to make that happen.

Keep in mind that the letter to the Hebrews was written to, most likely, a single Christian congregation. Obviously, the letter was under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and so it was circulated and became part of the cannon of Scripture. The point being that although we can and should apply these things to ourselves individually, they are also to be applied to a church body.

Starting in verse 12, the author moves from theology into application and example. The Church that was written to had been through difficult times. Society was against them. Remember that these are the ones who had had their property seized. They were weary and perhaps dejected.

While we have not suffered in the same way as they did, it is easy for us to become weary and dejected. We are bombarded with all the things going on in the world that are so against our God. It is easy to want to quit the race and just try to coast quietly. Our hands feel weak and our knees feel feeble; we grow tired of the race, we grow tired of the fight.

But, that is not acceptable in the Christian life. The Bible tells us over and again to preserve. We are told to endure. Jesus warned all those who wanted to be His followers to count the cost. The cost to follow Christ is high. He gave His life for us and He demands our life in return. The Bible promises us peace and prosperity and well-being; but while there is definitely earthly blessing, these are spiritual promises.

In the mean time we have a marathon to run. A marathon is a long distance endurance race. It requires discipline to run one; and sometimes that discipline is to strengthen weak members of the body. And this applies to us as individuals and to the church body. When things are difficult, we are called to suck it up and deal with it. Strengthen ourselves through Christ. At the same time, we have a Christian responsibility to strengthen others of the church.

These two callings are not opposed to each other. In Galatians 6:2, Paul tells us to carry each other’s burdens. But a couple verses later in verse 5, he tells them to carry their own burden or load. The word translated burden or load in verse 5 is something like a knapsack; something relatively light. The word translated burden in verse 2 is a bolder; something large and heavy.

So, we are to carry our own weight, shoulder our own responsibilities; in the power and strength of the Holy Spirit we are to run our Christian race without giving up. At the same time, we are also to help fellow Christians who are struggling with a heavy weight; sickness, loss or sickness of a loved one, divorce, unruly children. It becomes part of our own burden to help with the burdens of our Christian siblings.

In 1 Corinthians 9:24 Paul writes: *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.* Paul speaks in terms here of an earthly race; but here is the beautiful thing about the Christian race: it is not a competition. Each of us has our own race to run and if we endure to the end, we receive the prize. Part of the way we win our race is to shoulder our own burdens, while also helping to shoulder the heavy burdens of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

While taking on burdens seems counterintuitive for running a race, Christian responsibility is part of the work God has laid out for us from before the beginning of time. But this section of Hebrews also warns us of another burden we need to avoid and that is sin. At the beginning of chapter 12, we were advised against the encumbrance of sin; of how sin will entangle you as you try to run, tripping you up and causing you to fall during your race.

Here in verse 13 we consider what sin does to our path. It makes our path uneven; it puts in rocks and tree roots and mud: sin is something that will cause you to fall and it will cause you harm. If we are running a race with a sore knee, the last thing we want is to step into loose gravel. We must clear our own path of debris.

But we are also members of the church. We must be careful that we don’t put a stumbling block in the path of someone else. Verse 14 begins, “*Pursue peace with all men*” and while “all” is exactly what it means, the context of the passage is the church. We are to pursue peace will all our fellow Christians, and especially the ones in our own church body. Notice the word is pursue, not simply seek or hope for. It is active and it is part of our race.

Each of us has our own God-given personalities. Unfortunately, in this fallen world, sometimes those personalities clash. For example, I tend to be a very laid back, easy-going individual. I move slowly. I am a terrible irritation to type A personalities. Although I shouldn’t try to change who I am, I need to be aware of this so that I don’t do things to needlessly irritate those who are more driven in life.

Providing for a smooth path on which to race also means to help remove the obstacles that might be there. Of course, the obstacles are sin; sin needs to be removed in our Christian race. But it’s important to see in verse 13 that part of the reason for removing the sin is to help heal those who are wounded by it. Keep that in mind. All of us who sin are wounded by it. We need to have the sin removed so we can be healed from its effects. And sometimes we need help.

In the church, we can help each other in leveling the path; in dealing with sin. But we have to be so careful. This does not mean becoming the “sin police”. The last thing any church needs is a busybody running around looking for and pointing out the sin of everyone else. Each of us has more than enough sin in our own lives to keep us occupied.

So what does this mean? Primarily it means loving, and accepting, and caring for our fellow Christians. We do not excuse the sin itself, but we don’t condemn. Remember that there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus, so there is no place for condemnation in His body. All of us are in the same boat; all of us owe a great debt to our Master that we can’t pay. He has forgiven our great debt; we must forgive others their small and strengthen them in their struggle.

Now, yes, there are times when a great sin must be dealt with. Church discipline can be necessary. Avoiding fellowship with an unrepentant believer has its place. But these are few and far between. Our normal everyday affiliation with the church family is to be kindness and patience. God will discipline His children; the Holy Spirit will convict. We are to love our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Along with pursuing peace with all men is pursuing sanctification. Sanctification is the process by which we become mature Christians. It is the process by which we become like Jesus. And yes, sanctification requires discipline. Sanctification is a lifelong process that won’t be complete until we see Jesus face to face.

Interestingly, our sanctification is accomplished by the Holy Spirit. He is the One who does the work of actually changing our hearts and making us holy. But that does not mean that we sit by and wait for it to happen. Again, we are to pursue it, not just seek it or hope it comes along. We put forth effort to become holy; we persevere in running the race; we endure the hardships that come along in life; understanding all along that God is for us. He wants us to be with Him.

Part of the Christian life, part of the discipline we endure, is exhortation. There is a lot of admonishment in the verses we have been studying. It can leave us with the feeling of a bigger list of things we must do, things we must avoid, more things we can get in trouble for. But there is another part to exhortation and that is encouragement. We don’t want to miss the encouragement. That is one of the reasons for keeping the whole Bible in mind as we delve deep into one section.

Even in this section of Scripture is encouragement. It begins with the cloud of witnesses mentioned in verse 1. They were people just as we are. They had certain spiritual gifts given to them, but so do each of us. In other words, if they can do it, we can do it. And so many of those mentioned didn’t even get to experience the revelation of God through Jesus Christ; and we have.

Keep in mind that our salvation, that our sanctification, is ultimately not up to us. We have work to do, but it doesn’t depend on us. Philippians 1:6 tells us, “*that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*” We try not to mess up, but if we do, we repent and move on. The Almighty has cast our sins into the sea of forgetfulness. He will never bring them up again.

In the Gospel according to John in chapter 10, Jesus tells us, “*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 the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.*” Once we truly belong to Jesus, no power in heaven or on earth, even satan himself, even our own self, can take us back from the Father. This has to be one of the most comforting verses in all of Scripture. Once we are saved, we can’t mess it up.

Further, we do not run this race alone. In Matthew chapter 28 Jesus tells us, “*I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*” Even though we may suffer sore trials, the yoke of Jesus is light, because He helps us to carry it. Even if we feel alone and feel as if God has abandon us; we have the promise that Jesus is right there with us every moment; providing whatever we need to keep on.

The race is long and arduous. We are called to persevere and endure. The cost of following Christ is high. But it is worth everything we pay and more.

*“Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard,  
And which have not entered the heart of man,  
All that God has prepared for those who love Him.”*

1 Cor 2:9

Prayer

Lord God, it is no surprise to You that evil holds sway over this world. You are well aware that Your people who are called by Your name are oppressed in spirit by all in this world that raises itself up against You. We are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. We are those who mourn that Your will is not done on this earth.

Our hands become weak, our knees become feeble; it is hard for us to desire to continue in the work You have for us to do. But in these times, may Your Holy Spirit remind us that when we see these things our redemption draws near. May what we see goad us into realizing that time is short and there is a huge harvest that needs to be brought in.

Remind us that as long as we draw breath, our work here is not done. Keep us aware of the tremendous freedom we have in Christian liberty; not to abuse it, but to press on even when we fail, knowing that Jesus’ sacrifice was perfect and takes away all our sin. Give us strength; Thy will be done; come Lord Jesus.

In the precious name of Jesus we pray

Amen