

Fearfully Run the Race of Hope
Hebrews 12:12-17

Proverbs 4

Deuteronomy 28:1-14

Responsive Romans 5:1-7

As we will see this morning as we read our passage, it is directly linked to what we talked about last week, so for context I want to start out this morning by reading starting in verse 7, and read through to verse 17. The Author earlier here in chapter 12 had used the analogy of an Athlete running a race talking about the faith and life of the believer. In our passage today he seems to pick it up again here in reference to what he had been writing about. Starting out here in verse 12, with “therefore” he is now applying what he had wrote to his readers. Talking about the christian life, and the reality of faith, that fact that true faith will endure, but the fact that there are those who may appear to have faith, but are as he put it in verse 8, illegitimate and not sons. For a loving father will chasten his children so that they may learn and grow from their errors,

And since this is true, he says, Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees. In these 2 verses is this image of an athlete who is becoming weary, he is feeling weak, and his hands are at his side, on the verge of giving up. The severity of this race for the Christian, with its continuous trials, and discipline could be enough to cause one to want to just quit. Giving in to discouragement, falter and go off course.

But the thing to remember, and this is the Authors point, is that we must not dwell in the present trial or struggle, but rather look to Christ, the prize and press on... strengthen the hands and knees, continue to run, to strive for the mark and do not give into discouragement, and sin, for the struggle in this race and this outcome has eternal consequences. The realities of this life, is that present struggles are nothing more then the path to the great prize at the end. These Hebrews that this author writes to are not the only ones running this race, and neither are we which I think is largely why he went through the effort to list so many in chapter 11.

Do not be discouraged, do not give up, for look at this great cloud of witnesses that have gone before.. remember, you are numbered among this crowd if you endure, if your faith is of the same faith as these then you will not fail, for God can not fail. In verse 13 he says, “make straight paths for you feet, which is a quote of Proverbs 4 verse 25 and following, “Let your eyes look straight ahead, and your eyelids look right before you. Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established. Do not turn to the right or the left, remove your foot from evil.” But look at what Proverbs 3 says, verse 5. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding, In all your ways acknowledge him.....and he shall direct your paths.”

And there it is, this admonition by the Author here to make your paths straight, to not falter, to continue on the path of faith and righteousness, for it is God who has set you upon it, and it is God who has caused you to walk it, so “Let your eyes look straight ahead, toward the prize, toward Christ, do not turn to the right or to the left but be grounded in your faith, trusting in your savior, and resting in the hope that only he can give. As proverbs 3 says, Trust in the Lord, with all your heart, in all your ways acknowledge him, look, and see how he is working in your life, notice and be wary of his guiding hand. Lean not on your own understanding, but rather trust him who is in control of it all.

All of this has to do with your faith, and it is your faith put to practice. As Vic would say, this is where the rubber meets the road. As we all know, there is so many distractions, and temptations that arise which seek to draw us off this path. Which is why it is so important to be in the word, to be in prayer so that your heart and mind is attuned to God daily, in this is power to overcome, and in this is strength to persevere.

Looking at the next few verses here in Proverbs 3, Solomon goes on to say, “Do not be wise in your own eyes, Fear the Lord and depart from evil, it will be health to your flesh and strength to your bones.” Again we see this same language, much like in the book of Hebrews of lifting up your hands and making feeble knees strong...but what does this strength come from? Well, Solomon says, from fearing the Lord. This isn't something that is talked about much in Christianity, the fear of the Lord.

But it is true, even we as his children should have a fearful understanding on God. Hebrews 11 the Author there likens God's chastisement to that of our earthly fathers, which is something that we all feared as children was it not? While we loved our fathers, and respected them...there is also an element of fear of their wrath. If it is the same with our earthly fathers, should it not be even more so with our heavenly father? A healthy fear of God, and an understanding of his chastisement and punishment for sin should excite in us a desire to flee from evil.

Of course we know, that the punishment for his children is not the same as for those who are not, for Christ paid the ultimate punishment for our sins, he took upon himself the wrath of God so that we may be called blessed children. But, we are still in this flesh, and we are children who at times fall into sin, so who are we to think that there will not be some punishment for it? Solomon here implores his reader, and says.. this is wisdom, to fear God, and that fear should drive us and remind us to depart from evil, and if we do it will be health to our flesh and strength to our bones.

No, this is not some sort of prosperity gospel, but it is wise and true council. For we know, as Christians, that sin has a staining effect, that sinful actions have consequences, and sinful thoughts plague us. One of the big issues of today, is this simple fact...there is no longer a fear of God. We have painted him as this benevolent santa clause who will just overlook our sin, just pretend it never happened because, well.. he loves us. But this is a misunderstanding of God's righteousness, God can not endure sin, for he is holy, he is perfect, and he is just. Therefore sin must be accounted for, For us who believe, it is covered by the blood of Christ...we forget how vial sin is to God, it is only through death, and the shedding of blood that there is reconciliation, and yet, he loved us so, that he sent his son, he took upon himself flesh, so that he could pay that price, the punishment of death which is necessary for the atonement of our sins.

As Jesus himself said, “Do not fear those who kill the body but can not kill the soul, but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” I think that it is healthy, and right to have a reverent fear of God. How much do you think a true and deep understanding of the fear of God would impact everyone around us, even the church itself. I think we have softened on this point over the generations, we have put an over emphasis on the love of God, and in doing so have left off the righteous, holy, and just punishment of God. Yes, it is true that God himself is love, he is a merciful, gracious, loving father, but just like our own fathers and mothers, there is still a punishment for rebellion.

And it is for this reason that it is of upmost importance to keep our eyes upon him, to make straight our paths, to persevere, to seek holiness, to flee from sin. Our lives are our witness to our savior. If we are no different then the world, then there is no witness, for there is no life. People are watching you, and it is imperative that your life reflects your claims. That is what running this race is all about, and what the next few verses are dealing with here in chapter 12.

How do you make the way straight, how do you not veer to the right or to the left, well first is to look to Christ, and second we see here in verse 14, "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord." Our God is the God of peace, as we saw back in chapter 7, Melchizedek, the king of peace, was a foreshadow of Christ, the true king of peace, who through his death brought us who were once estranged from God, to now being adopted children.

So should we not, as his children, also reflect his love, this love that he showed us upon others? As Christians we are to strive for peace with all men, for even that itself is a witness to our heavenly father. We do not strive for this for our own purpose and outcomes, but rather we are called to imitate our father so that the blessing of God's peace may flow through us into the lives of others so that the effect of the gospel will reach out into the society around us. As verse 14 says, we are to pursue this peace, with holiness. This is an important distinction to make, for there is a type of holiness that exists without peace. But this holiness, is not true holiness, but is rather self-serving, false piety, steeped in pride, arrogance, and violence. Could one say that the pharisees were holy? They did have an appearance of holiness, but Jesus said, that they were white washed tombs, they appeared holy, they looked clean..but were really full of decaying rotting corpses.

So just like with faith, we see that there is also a true holiness, and a false holiness. True holiness is sought through peace, because it is not self serving, nor self seeking. We as Christians seek to be at peace with all men, not for our benefit, but for theirs. A self righteous person, must prove themselves righteous and holy, they do not seek peace, but rather use their self righteous holiness as a means to judge others. These are seeking the praise of men, true holiness is instead inward and private, and is between an individual, and God. The true holy, and good deeds that are performed from this person who loves the Lord is nothing more than the fruits of their love toward God.

It is in this way in which others may see the Lord, for if we live in such a way that our lives reflect the love of God that is in us our lives become a ministry of God's light that is shining through us. Verse 14 implores the reader to pursue peace, and holiness. Pursuing is an action, it is something that takes effort and is something that we as Christians must strive to do. Each is not mutually exclusive, for one can not have peace without first having holiness. For true peace only comes from God, and God will only grant such peace to his holy people that he has set aside for himself. And like wise we see the opposite, where there is no holiness and peace, there is only strife, conflict for in this individual, or even bigger picture talking about society, or the world as a whole, it is sin that is running rampant, and all of these things are products of that rebellion.

As Galatians 5 says, "the works of the flesh are evident, which are adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like...none of which produce peace. So it is through the pursuit of being at peace with mankind, and seeking after Christ, seeking after that which is holy that is apparent in our lives that we, Christians are different.

But that peace which we pursue, the holiness that we strive for, comes from a relationship of peace with God himself. The Lord of peace, gives peace which the world can not, and he whom God has given peace through faith in Christ is at peace with God. This is also why our fear, and reverence of God is not a fear of judgment such as the world but instead a reverent fear understanding what God has saved you from. Knowing that God, is the all powerful sovereign Lord over all things, and that your very breath does not happen without him first willing it, should drive our hearts and minds to worship him and in effect be a means of combating sin which arises in our flesh.

Knowing that sin is a rebellion against this very God, who has determined your next heart beat. So yes, this should cause some fear to well up in you....but, that fear should not linger nor control you, for this same God that says he despises sin, and that he being holy and just must punish sin, has also Loved you enough to send his son to take that ultimate punishment for you.

So our fear, then becomes praise, in recognition of our salvation. And our life then is given meaning and hope, for if we are still here, despite our sin and struggles in the flesh, then God has a purpose and a plan for us. My goal in all of this, is not to paint God as this heartless righteous judge, but to hopefully grow in our thought processes on who this God truly is. As I said earlier, I think that we have made God to be little, something that we carry around in our back pocket to pull out in case things start getting a little rough. We have lost the awe of God, in this generation with our over focus on God's love and forgiveness we have made God into an image that we desire, as some have said before..a cosmic santa clause. We have left off the other half of his nature because it is scary, the righteous holy and mighty nature of a God who is a jelious God.

It is important to have this larger picture of God, a deeper and greater understanding. Through which our love for him, our reliance upon him, and our reverence toward him will only grow. Having an understanding of God's wrath, and the fear which it should rightly produce, helps us to understand and see his love toward us even that much more. And all this brings weight to verse 15, which says, "looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God, lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled." The author returns again to the point that he has been teaching these Hebrews, he is concerned for them that there are some in their midst who maybe leading them astray. In chapter 3 they were warned to take care lest there be an evil heart in any of them that would cause them to desert the living God. Chapter 4, he advised them to fear lest any of them fall short of reaching God's rest, in chapter 6, he warns of the impossiblensness of those who were once enlightened who have turned away in rebellion to return, and in chapter 10 he cautioned against the sin of deliberately profaning the blood of this covenant.

Then, continuing in this thought, he warns again here in verses 15-17, be careful lest anyone fall short of the grace of God, be careful that those in your midst are not wolves in sheeps clothing, who bring in a root of bitterness among you which causes trouble in your members and turns brother against brother and sister against sister dividing the house which should stand united in Christ. And talking about the fear of God, look at 16 and 17, "lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one moresel of food sold his birthright. For you know that afterward when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently through tears."

Esau was a man who did not value his inheritance, he essentially trampled underfoot that which was sacred in trading his inheritance for a morsel of food. He gave up his sacred birthright for a temporary bit of food to quench the hunger of his flesh. The author here is warning of something even greater then this, he is warning his readers do not barter your heavenly birthright for a moment of worldly ease and peace. We must run this race, endure the hardships and not be discouraged, or enticed to trade the reward of this race to escape the struggles of it in this life.

As Phillip Houghes wrote, "Being well versed in the old testament, these Hebrews knew the tragic outcome of Esau's profane deed. How afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected. The moment of contempt for his birthright had consequences which could not be reversed. HE lost, irretrievably, the blessing of the firstborn in an earthly lineage;

but those whom our author is addressing are in danger of forfeiting their place in the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven. Esau found no way of escape from the judgment he had brought upon himself, and in his rejection he found not chance to repent, though he sought after it with tears.

As is recorded in Genesis 27, His weeping was of no avail, for he became embittered, for his was not the godly grief which produces repentance that leads to salvation, but a worldly grief which produces death. That is to say, it was his loss that he mourned, not his profane action which caused that loss. How much less escape will there be from judgment for those who so easily cast aside this great salvation they have tasted in Christ Jesus?

As Paul wrote to the Phillipians, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for his own good pleasure.” We must be wary that we heed the warning of the Author here, and are not tempted, nor give into to temptation to be like an Esau, trading our birthright as the son's and daughters of God for a mere moment of earthly ease. We must run this race, we must endure, we must keep the faith, we must keep Christ as our focus, for it is only in him that we have hope, and may find peace, that is true, everlasting, eternal peace.