

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 as the last of the exhausted marathon runners were finishing their 26.2 mile race, nearly an hour after the winner had already crossed the finish line.

As the remaining spectators prepared to leave, those sitting near the marathon gates heard the sound of sirens and police whistles. And as those spectators turned their attention toward the gate, a lone figure wearing the colors of Tanzania entered the stadium. His name was John Stephen Akhwari and he was the last of all the marathon runners.

And as he hobbled around the 400 meter Olympic stadium track pressing toward the finish line it was very apparent why he was the last of the runners. One of his legs was bloodied and bandaged. He had obviously been injured during the course of the race but here he was, in full view of these last few thousand remaining spectators, still striving to reach the finish line.

How did these spectators respond to what they were seeing? They all stood up and began to applaud and continued to applaud him until he finished. What John Stephen Akhwari exemplified in his very long and difficult marathon race, right up until the time he crossed the finish-line, was the same no-quit attitude that every true born again believer must also possess, nurture, and sustain throughout the course of their own very difficult and sometimes very painful long-distance race of faith.

The importance of possessing this no quit attitude and doing everything we can do to possess it, nurture it and sustain it will hopefully come alive for us this morning as we once again return to our ongoing study of the Book of Hebrews. And again why was this book written? It was written to encourage a group of struggling Hebrew believers living in Rome. In the midst of a great persecution they were actually thinking about quitting their race of faith, or in other words, thinking about turning away from Christ, and from the gospel, to return to Judaism or some form of it.

So where are we now in our study of this book? In Hebrews 12:4-11, the author had just equated all the sufferings that Christians have to endure

throughout their long-distance race of faith to God's loving parental discipline or in other words to God's loving efforts to train them and to mature them. And this is how we need to view all of our sufferings. How important is it for Christians to understand this basic truth? It is extremely important, for if we can understand how God is using our sufferings to mature us and train us we will be far better able to run with endurance the race of faith that God has set before us. This is where we left off in our study.

So after the author helped his readers to view their sufferings correctly or in other words to view God's discipline correctly what did the author do next?

The author understanding the challenges that would be faced by those who were being disciplined by God in their long-distance race of faith, exhorted his readers to do four different things (Hebrews 12:12-17). And we will find these four exhortations in Hebrews 12:12-17.

Now let me read this passage for you. And this is what it says, "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. (15) See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springing up causes troubles, and by it many be defiled; (16) that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. (17) For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears." In this morning's message we will only be able to go through verse 14 and the first three exhortations.

What was the first exhortation that this author introduced to help his readers in their long-distance race of faith? The author exhorted his readers to strengthen weak hands and feeble knees (Hebrews 12:12 cf. Isaiah 35:3-4).

Let me read for you Hebrews 12:12 and see if this is not so and what does this verse say? It says this, "Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble..." So did the author, in light of the certainty of God's discipline and the challenges that God's discipline would present to

His children, exhort his readers to strengthen weak hands and weak knees? Yes! He did! But what did he mean by what he said?

The author, in this verse, had once again returned to the same athletic imagery that he had introduced earlier in Hebrews 12:1 when he, compared the Christian life to a long-distance runner and then challenged his readers to run the race of faith that had been set before them with endurance.

But this time, as he returned to the imagery of a long-distance runner in order to provide a back-drop for another exhortation, he did not focus on the difficulty of the race in general but rather he focused on something very specific, he focused on the weak hands and the feeble knees of an exhausted long-distance runner. In other words he began to focus on the drooping hands and buckling knees of an exhausted long-distance runner, which of course if not corrected could very easily prevent him from finishing his race.

So in using this imagery, what did the author figuratively exhort his readers to do in light of their own very difficult long-distance race of faith? He exhorted his readers, figuratively speaking, to strengthen the weak hands and the feeble knees of those who had over time begun to show signs of spiritual exhaustion or in other words who had begun over time to show signs of having lost interest in following Christ and living a life pleasing to Christ.

Can this loss of interest actually be detected? Of course it can. Those who have begun to lose interest in following Christ will begin to lose interest in prayer. They will begin to lose interest in the Bible. They will begin to lose interest in Christian fellowship. They will begin to lose interest in Christian service. They will begin to lose interest in evangelism. They will lose interest in all these things as they become more and more interested in the things of this world.

The Christian life is not easy. When we or someone else begins to show signs of spiritual exhaustion what should we do? We need, based on Hebrews 12:12, "to strengthen weak hands and feeble knees."

So how would someone go about doing that? How would someone go about strengthening the weak hands and feeble knees of someone who, in the midst of their long-distance race of faith, had begun to spiritually struggle? Great question!

At first glance it might appear that the author in Hebrews 12:12 had not given his readers any indication of how he might have wanted them to go about strengthening the weak hands and feeble knees of those who were presently struggling. But this is not so. He had given them a clear indication of how they might go about doing that? What do I mean?

Hebrews 12:12 is a brief restatement of a longer exhortation from Isaiah 35:3-4, which these Hebrews readers would have been very familiar with. And because they would have been very familiar with this longer exhortation they would have immediately known what the author would have wanted them to do, when he exhorted them to strengthen the weak hands and feeble knees of those who had begun to struggle.

So let me now read for you Isaiah 35:3-4 and see if this is not so and this is what these verses say, "(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 ... and save you."

When Isaiah wrote these verses to the Jews in the southern kingdom they were being threatened by various outside national powers. And those threats had begun to take a spiritual toll on many of them. So what did Isaiah do to strengthen them? He exhorted them to encourage those who were spiritually struggling under these difficult circumstances to focus on the national hope of Israel, which was God's promised coming and their future deliverance. This is what Isaiah did.

So in light of this Old Testament passage, which most likely was the basis for his exhortation in Hebrews 12:12, what did the author mean when he exhorted his readers to "to strengthen weak hands and feeble knees"?

Based on Isaiah 35:3-4 when the author exhorted his readers "to strengthen weak hands and feeble knees" he was calling his readers to help those who had begun to show signs of spiritual exhaustion to focus on the certainty and blessings of Christ's promised return (John 14:1-3).

And isn't this exactly what Jesus did with his disciples in John 14:1-3. When Jesus having just spoken to them about His departure and knowing how difficult that would be on them, he said to them, "Do not let your heart be

troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. (2) In My Father's house are many mansions, if it were not so, I would have told you; I go to prepare a place for you. (3) And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that where I am there you may be also."

Now are those comforting words? Absolutely! And do you believe that in the years after Christ spoke those words, that His disciples would have used those words to strengthen one another's weak hands and feeble knees as they pressed forward toward the finish line in their own very difficult long-distance race of faith? Absolutely! And we also need to be doing the same thing for one another in the midst of our very difficult long-distance race of faith.

After exhorting his readers to strengthen weak hands and feeble knees in Hebrews 12:12 what did the author exhort his readers to do next in light of the much suffering that would most certainly keep coming their way?

The author exhorted his readers to "make straight paths for their feet" (Hebrews 12:13 cf. Proverbs 4:26-27).

Let me read for you the very beginning of Hebrews 12:13 and see if this is not so and this is what it says, "and make straight paths for your feet".

So did the author exhort his reader to make straight paths for their feet? Yes! He did! But he did not stop there, as he had in Hebrews 12:12, rather he went on to explain why he was exhorting them to do this. And what was his explanation? "So that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather healed."

So once again we see this author using the athletic imagery of a long-distance runner to help communicate to his readers what he wanted to say. But this time he was not focusing on the imagery of an exhausted long-distance runner who over time had begun to show signs of physical exhaustion, as he did in verse 12, but rather this time he chose to focus on the imagery of a long distance runner who, through some kind of physical trauma to one of his legs, had become "lame" and if not corrected would eventually result in that injured limb becoming "out of joint."

So how might this imagery of an injured long-distance runner be applied to these readers in their long-distance race of faith, as well as to us in our long-distance race of faith?

When an individual by grace through faith embraces Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and enters into their long-distance race of faith, they will not only be subject at times to spiritual exhaustion but also to spiritual injury brought about by some excruciatingly painful human event. This could very easily leave them focused, not on following Christ and living a life pleasing to Christ, but rather it could leave them very much focused on their injury and the pain of that injury.

In light of the backdrop of this imagery, what did the author exhort his readers to do if they found themselves in that particular situation? He exhorted them to "make straight paths for their feet". So what does this exhortation mean?

This exhortation was most likely based on Proverbs 4:26-27, which again the Hebrew recipients of the Book of Hebrews would most certainly have been familiar with.

Now let me read these verses for you and I will be reading from the NASV. This is what these verses say, (26) "Watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established. (27) Do not turn to the right nor to the left; turn your foot from evil."

So in light of this passage, what most likely was the basis for the author's exhortation in Hebrews 12:13 what was the author exhorting his readers to do when he exhorted his readers, "to make straight paths for their feet ...".

Based on Proverbs 4:26-27 the author was exhorting his readers, when they were spiritually staggered by a particular trauma, to make sure that they remained committed to staying on the path of obedience.

So let me ask you this question: why was this exhortation so important for his readers to heed? The reason is quite simple.

Because of the great persecution that these Hebrew believers were presently experiencing some of them had in fact become spiritually staggered or in

other words had become spiritually "lame." They had become focused on the injury and the pain of the injury and had become much less focused on Christ and following Christ or in other words on the path of obedience.

For some of them this exhortation was not hypothetical at all but was an exhortation that they needed to immediately heed. What did the author tell them would happen if they chose not to heed the exhortation? He told them that if they did not heed the exhortation but rather continued to stay focused on their trauma and the pain of their trauma, their figuratively speaking spiritually "lame" leg would in fact eventually become "out of joint".

And what would that mean practically on a spiritual level? It would mean that their long-distance race of faith would never be completed and they would never be able to cross the finish line. This very clearly testifies to them as well as to others that they had never truly possessed genuine, living, saving faith. For God did not save them to quit the race but, according to His great power and His abiding love, to finish it. This is why those who endure to the end, according to Matthew 24:13, will be saved.

So now we know what the author told his readers about what would happen if they chose not to heed his exhortation. But what did he tell his readers would happen if they did heed it?

He told them that their "limb" that figuratively speaking had become lame because of some kind of excruciating and painful trauma would, rather than suffering further damage, would actually be "healed." Thus making it possible for them, to once again focus on Christ and living a life pleasing to Christ as they once again pressed forward toward the finish line of their faith and the reward that was awaiting them.

After exhorting his readers to make straight paths for their feet what was the author's next exhortation to his readers?

The author exhorted his readers to pursue "peace" and "sanctification" (Hebrews 12:14). Let me now read for you Hebrews 12:14 and see if this is not so and this is what it says, "Pursue peace with all men and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord."

This exhortation obviously consists of two very broad basic commands, which may not seem as if they are connected with what came before. But they are. If we by the grace of God do in fact press through spiritual exhaustion as well spiritual injuries in order to continue to follow Christ and a life pleasing to Christ what will we inevitably pursue?

Those who continue to follow after Christ will inevitably pursue "peace with all men" (Hebrews 12:14).

"All men" includes all those within the church, but also those outside the church. That is true even if they are persecuting you and making your life extremely difficult. What does Luke 6:27-28 tell us? "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 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 and who are very willing to spread falsehoods about them. It includes "all" men!

But there is also something else that we will inevitably pursue if we, in our long-distance race of faith continue to follow after Christ and a life pleasing to Christ.

Those who continue to follow after Christ will inevitably pursue sanctification (Hebrews 12:14).

Let us go back to verse 14 and read it again but this time we will finish it. And what does it say? It says this, "Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord." So what does this mean? This is not talking about positional sanctification. That has already been accomplished by God when we were placed into Christ and declared to be righteous by God in Romans 8:1 and set apart for Him. So what is being talked about here? It is this:

Those who are pursuing sanctification in Hebrews 12:14 are those, who as a manifestation of their faith in Christ, are continuously seeking to bring their lives into conformity with Christ.

How important is it that we pursue this practical sanctification? It is so important that the author makes it very clear that without it "no one will see the Lord." Therefore it is a sure measure of whether or not our professed faith in Christ is real, genuine, living saving faith. If we are actively pursuing practical sanctification it confirms that we have been in fact positionally sanctified by God in Christ.

When we by grace through faith embraced Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior we entered a long-distance race of faith. This race of faith will not be easy. But no matter how severely we may be tested nor for how long we may be tested, what can we not do? We cannot quit!

May God, in spite of what we may have to suffer, give us the grace to keep running our long-distance race of faith until we cross the finish line and into the arms of Christ.