

HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part fifty

Sunday, April 22nd, 2018 - 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #2044

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THE FOUNDER AND PERFECTER OF OUR FAITH

Hebrews 12:1-2 - "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, [2] looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

There is a planned progression in these opening verses of chapter twelve. Our writer follows the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in a way that instructs us all not to waste or miss the proper use of the list of exemplars of faith in chapter eleven.

It is our nature to be inspired by examples. It is our nature to want to mimic their faith and devotion. One might easily jump to the conclusion that *these* dear souls persisted in faith toward God and now *I* will do the same. And that's certainly a noble aspiration. Let's all lay down our lives in faith just as Abraham and Jacob and Moses and Joseph and David did.

And that's where today's important text comes in. Is that what's next on the agenda? Let's all copy the faith of these early saints? Not quite. It's important to note our text *doesn't* read, "**Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also copy their faith**" (12:1).

While we must study and know the Biblical accounts faith can't just be *mimicked*. There are *roots* to it. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's back-up and work through these well-known words:

1) THIS TEXT BEGINS WITH A SUBTLE REMINDER OF THE ROOTS OF FRUITFUL BIBLE STUDY

Hebrews 12:1 - "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...."

Before we analyze what's specifically *commanded* in this verse let's pause and ponder what's first *implied*. Our writer assumes our *responsibility to consider our connection to the examples listed* - "...let us also...."

Our writer is banishing from our minds the notion that Bible reading is finished with just the *reading*. Fruitful Bible study only *starts* with reading. To finish your Bible study in the act of reading is to finish your road trip with the starting of your car. Starting the car is just what *initiates* the entire trip. True, nothing else can happen *without* starting the car. It's vitally important. But, by itself, it won't take you anywhere.

That's what that telling little word "*since*" is all about - "**Therefore, since we are surrounded....**" It's a very logical word - "*since*." It always *implies something more to come* - "**Since this - then that!**" The word *since* doesn't even stand on its own.

Try it yourself in a sentence - "**People, since we've had a decline in sales....**" And you're left hanging. "Then what? *Since* we've had a decline in sales, *what?*"

That word "*since*" calls for follow-up. It's a doorway word leading to something else. And that's what our writer expects from our thinking in our text. He is making clear there is a *reason* we've been surrounded in Scripture by a great cloud of witnesses and examples.

Since there will come times - lots of them - when nothing about continuing in faith and obedience makes outward sense, you will need these faithful witnesses. You will need their accounts *since* there will come times when two dozen arguments *against* perseverance will automatically marshal themselves against what you're trying to believe in your mind.

That's why those witnesses are in the Scriptures. Go back to them again. Be "*surrounded*" by them - like a fortress around a camp. Make them the air you breathe. Immerse yourself in them. Make notes. What did they do right? What did they do wrong? How did they pray? What did God promise them? What did they have to go through? How long did they have to wait?

Their stories are there for a reason. They're not just entertainment:

Romans 15:4 - "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

1 Corinthians 10:11 - "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come."

Something living begins to happen when you make *connections* with the Scriptures. The whole Bible *talks to you*. And I'm not just using flowery speech when I say the Bible is a *speaking* book. That's exactly the way our writer describes the relationship between the ancient text and the present readers of it. He specifically says the Bible *speaks* to his readers:

Hebrews 12:5 - "And 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.'"

The "*exhortation*" he's writing about is found in *Proverbs*. It was written generations removed from our writer's readers. And yet he will boldly declare those words are "*addressing*" his readers. That's the Spirit-inspired text. And it's beautiful.

2) THERE IS AN ACTION REQUIRED TO FOLLOW IN THE FAITH OF THESE OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

Hebrews 12:1a - "...Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely..."

Our writer is careful to explain why many readers find no connection between these great examples of faithfulness and their own life of discipleship. The connection with these great past examples and the readers of our text in Hebrews isn't just a *mental* connection - "I've read these stories and now I'm going to be like that!" You can just *admire* your way into the power of these examples.

No. That will never work. The connection isn't just a *mental* connection - knowing and admiring their stories. The connection is deeper. It's a *spiritual* connection. It has its roots in making the same *denials of self* - the same *renouncing of convenience* - the same *exercising of patience*, the same *hard, lonely counter-cultural decisions* - as these Old Testament saints.

"*Since we have these witnesses....let us also lay aside every weight, and the sin which clings so closely...*" The first call in the life of faith is the commitment to *denying self governance*. We are called immediately to awareness that obstacles to our perseverance in faith abound. And most of them are *internal* and frequently *cherished* and *ingrained*.

What makes this challenge so difficult is the nature of our fallen condition described as "*weight*" and "*Sin*." It's like a deep *infection*. It doesn't lie lightly on the surface of our beings like some kind of rash or dandruff. It's more like a disease in the bloodstream or bone marrow.

There are sins "*which cling so closely*" (1) we come to think of them as a part of normal existence. We feel we can't live joyfully without them. They "*cling*" in such a way we don't think of them *separately from ourselves*. That's why that word "*weight*" is used. Our worst spiritual enemies are carried around like those extra five or ten pounds are carried around. You can't lose them - or "*lay them aside*" without laying aside what has become some of *yourself*.

We desperately need to appreciate the depth of this self-denying call. The idea is there is *no running of the race apart from the awareness that we can never afford to neglect examining our heart's loves and delights*. It isn't an easy thing to "*lay aside*" something we have grown to treasure. That's why Jesus deliberately likened it to plucking out an eye or cutting off a hand.

There is an inward tension that lasts as long as this race is being run. It's like an *arm-wrestling match* that never stops. *The flesh always desires against the Spirit* - **Galatians 5:17** - "*For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.*"

Don't miss the daily application of those words. There is a gravitational pull in our fallen selves. The ***natural desires for sexual expression will always press beyond the Scriptural bounds of heterosexual marriage. The natural desire for material possessions will always overindulge and never relinquish ownership for stewardship. The natural response to persecution will always be to compromise to save reputation and friendship. The natural response of wounded pride will always be to strike back to get justice when wronged.***

These are the ways our sin ***"clings to closely to us."*** These are the things we will constantly have to ***"lay aside."***

3) **IN DEFINING THE LIFE OF FAITH AS A RACE OUR WRITER EMPHASIZES NOT ITS START BUT ITS FINISH**

Hebrews 12:1b - ***"...and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us..."***

Understand the image here. This is not a race ***against other runners***. It's a contest to ***go the whole distance***. Each one has a course with its own struggles, challenges, pressures, joys and pains. The assignment is the same for each - never to take the eyes off Jesus right to the final finish line.

The first important word is ***"run"***. That idea behind ***running*** is the ***effort required***. Strolling is easy. Running isn't. Our writer knows no one will ***drift*** to the finish line. There will come times of trial and persecution and specific temptations that will require ***deep, exhausting effort***. God will help the weak. He will do nothing for the lazy.

The next important word is that word ***"endurance"*** - ***"...let us run with endurance..."*** If ***running*** implies effort, ***endurance*** implies patience. There are many struggles that will last longer than we'd like. The rewards of continued faith may be slower in coming than we had expected.

So patience gets extended in ***two*** specific areas. ***Trials*** can last much longer. ***Rewards*** can come much slower. Fruit never grows quickly. Remember how Jesus made the direct connection between ***patience*** and the ***fruitful life of the kingdom*** expressing itself in our hearts - **Luke 8:15** - ***"As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience."***

Run the race. Sloth and procrastination are deadly. Nothing good will come from ***slowness to obey***. The speed of ***running*** is the opposite of ***delay or excuse***. Then ***endure*** in the running. This is a longer race than many think. And much of it is without applause.

4) **CONTINUED DEVOTION TO JESUS WILL GUARANTEE YOUR LIFE'S HIGHEST DESTINY**

Hebrews 12:2 - ***"...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."***

I have ***three*** important thoughts from this verse:

- a) ***Looking to Jesus is not the same as looking to those faith witnesses in chapter eleven***. Those witnesses are an ***inspiration*** to our faith. Jesus is much more than an inspiration. He's the ***"founder and perfecter"*** of our faith.

Here's what that means. Jesus is the ***founder*** of my faith because He has ***provided*** entrance into the life of faith through His redeeming, sacrificial death on the cross. And that leads right into the second of our three thoughts:

- b) ***Jesus alone carries us to the ultimate destination of our faith***. He is not only faith's ***founder***. He is its guaranteed ***perfecter***.

Alert listeners may have noticed I left out an important phrase when I was going through the first verse. Look at it again - **Hebrews 12:1** - ***"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us..."***

"The race that is set before us..." This is not a random run just for exercise. And it's not a race of our own mapping. We are ***following*** all the while we are racing. The course is a course already ***"set before us."***

Jesus is not only the **“founder”** of my faith. He is its **“perfecter.”** Where does the race go? And how can we know we’re going to get there? We know because the one who became one of us in the incarnation has run the **very same race as fully human**. He is the only one who has already **completed** the race, though many have already died.

Our writer’s important point is Jesus alone has already become the first participant in the brand new creation. His resurrected body is the one we all - those already dead and those still alive - will one day possess. He is the only one **as a man with a resurrected body who is “...seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (2b)**. The finish line has **already been defined and crossed, and we are in the very same race**.

- c) **To run the race for the finish-line means embracing the shame of a Christ obsessed life.** It was a long time before I realized the punch of one phrase in this second verse:

Hebrews 12:2 - “...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, **despising the shame**, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

There has always been a **shame** attached to the impact of our Lord’s saving words and work. People who will gladly embrace the **moral** emphasis in Jesus - His love for His enemies - His beatitudes - His care for the poor and the needy - people who embrace **all** of these aspects resent the **saving words and works**. They especially resent the **exclusivity** He Himself attached to His redemption.

That **shame** was even attached to the way He died. The method of the cross wasn’t just chosen to cause Jesus’ death. It was chosen to portray a specific **sort of death**. The method was this world’s last attempt to **disgrace Jesus as one of the worst sort of people**.

And here’s the point. In redeeming **you** Jesus rejected the price of that shame. He loved you so much he **stomped on all the shame that came with redeeming you**.

And now here we all are. We’re following Jesus. We express our **love** for our wonderful Lord. And we do it the same way. We take every mocking word, every name we’re called - “intolerant” - “divisive” - “unloving” - “dogmatic” - “narrow-minded” - “hypocritical” - “judgmental” - we take all that shaming effort and we stomp on it. We refuse it. We aren’t threatened by it. And most importantly, we refuse to be intimidated by it.

Christ’s work **overturns the values of our culture**. And it embraces the inevitable scorn that will bring. We understand the One who laid out the race for us all experienced the same thing. And He reached out in love to bring the lost, and even the mockers the Father love.