

**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 a group of exhausted marathon runners were finishing their 26.2 mile race, nearly an hour after the winner of the race had already finished. So you can kind of picture the scene; this was the dregs, I mean, this was the end, this was kind of like - the day was certainly coming to an end for these runners. And for those in the stands, it was a long, long day. 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 - I have no idea what those colors were, can't tell you - but wearing the colors of Tanzania, entered through the gate, and onto the 400 meter track, as he pressed toward the finish line.

This fellow, whose name was John Stephen Akhwari, the last of the marathon runners, was clearly having a problem. He was hobbling, and it was very apparent to all these remaining spectators why that was; he had apparently suffered some type of significant injury during the course of the race. One of his legs was very bloodied and had been bandaged. So here he was, the last of this final group, and he was the last of the last of the final group, running around this 400-meter track, he was struggling. But the spectators were witnessing this, they all got up from their seats and began to applaud, and they continued to applaud him all the way until he finished the race. It was quite a sight, very memorable.

What John Stephen Akhwari, this last runner to finish that race, exemplified in this very long, difficult race, right up until he crossed the finish line, was the "no quit" attitude that every true born-again believer must also possess, nurture and maintain throughout the course of their own very difficult, and sometimes very painful, long-distance race of faith. No quitting. No dropping out. John Stephen Akhwari didn't do that, even though he was severely injured in the course of the race, and was finding it very difficult to finish it; neither can we as the believers, followers of Christ, entertain or

even possibly allow to cross our mind the thought of quitting our long-distance race of faith. We must continue on, keeping on. So he was exemplifying what we need to have - no quit. The importance of possessing this "no quit" attitude in doing something, and do everything that we can do to possess it, nurture it, and sustain it, will hopefully come alive for us this morning as we once again return back to the study of Hebrews.

Hopefully by the time that you leave here this morning, you'll be fully onboard. No matter what you're suffering, no matter what you have to endure, no matter what the thought that you will not allow to cross your mind, is quitting in your pursuit of Christ, and your seeking to live a life pleasing to Christ. You will not let up. So that's what my hope is for this morning's message. So we are now returning back to the book of Hebrews to make that thought come alive. And again, just reminding you of why this book was written, and you can see how appropriate this "no quit" attitude is to the setting of this book; hopefully remember that this book was written to a group of struggling Hebrew believers, living in Rome; who, in the midst of a great persecution, were actually thinking about...what? What were they thinking about in the midst of this great persecution? They were thinking about what? Quitting! Now do you see how appropriate this introductory story is?

This book, the book of Hebrews, was written to a group of people who were actually thinking about that, in the midst of what they were having to suffer. They actually had come to the place where they were not only thinking about quitting their race of faith; but more specifically, and particular to them, they were actually thinking about turning away from Christ, and from the gospel of Christ, and from following Christ to return back to Judaism, or some form of it. So that's what their thought process was, in the midst of their persecution; they were actually contemplating dropping out of the race, so they could return back to Judaism, or some form of it. So that's the setting for the book of Hebrews.

So where are we now in the progression of this book, in our study of this book? We've been at this for quite a long time, so where are we now? The

author in Hebrews 12, verses 4 through 11, 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. This is what he had just done in Hebrews 12, verses 4 through 11; he's trying to help these readers to understand that all they were suffering in respect to this persecution, and anything else they might have been suffering, or would suffer in the future, is all related to one thing, and that is God's loving parental discipline, where He would be coming alongside them to mature them and train them. He wanted them to understand this; for this author believed, and I believe correctly, for he believed that if they could understand what God was doing in the midst of all this suffering they were going through, they would be able to put themselves in a better position to endure those sufferings.

And wouldn't that seem to make sense? If you know that there's a purpose behind what you're suffering, it helps. So the writer of the book of Hebrews wanted to make sure that his Hebrew readers understood that all they were going through, in terms of this great persecution, were not there to destroy them, not to beat them down; but to build them up, to train and to mature them, with the hope that in doing so, they would be in better position to endure it. So that is what the author had just covered in Hebrews 12, verses 4 through 11. So after the author helped his readers, hopefully, to view their sufferings in this way, and hopefully everyone in this room this morning is hopefully also by faith taking what he said and viewing your sufferings in this way; that it's not there to destroy you, but to help you and to mature you, to train you.

What did the author do next, after he tried to help them to understand how they should view their sufferings? 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. So he knew they were going to be beat up. You know, they were already in the midst of a great persecution, right? They had already had property seized from them, many of them. Some of them had already been imprisoned. Things were going to get worse, not better. So this author wanted to help

them out, and so now he's going to help them out by exhorting them in four different ways; and he's going to do that in Hebrews 12, verses 12 to 17. To help them keep on keeping on throughout their long-distance race of faith, not to entertain the thought of quitting, dropping out; and that is what he is now going to do in these verses.

So let me read these verses for you, and I'll be reading from the New American Standard version; and these are the verses that we'll begin to consider this morning. Therefore, in light of all of these sufferings that are coming at you, and in light of how God is trying to use those sufferings to train you and to mature you, in light of all of this; "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 trouble, and by it many be defiled; 16 that there be no immoral, 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." So these are the verses that this author now gave to his readers, to try to help them to keep on keeping on, in light of the much suffering that they were going through and would continue to go through.

So in these verses, he provided them four different exhortations. This morning, we won't be able to go through all of these verses, and we won't be able to consider all of the exhortations; we'll only be able to go through verse 14, and consider only three of those exhortations. But they're important for us; because, hopefully, everyone in this room - we want to keep going, right? We don't want to quit. We made a decision to follow Christ, to live a life pleasing to Christ, and we want to stay at it until the end. But it's not easy, so we need to hear these four exhortations, we need to consider.

So what was the first one? The author exhorted his readers to strengthen

weak hands and feeble knees. Isn't that exactly what verse 12 tells us? "Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble." So the author, in that verse, in verse 12, exhorted his readers to strengthen weak hands and feeble knees. But what does this mean? He didn't say much more, he just said that. The author, in this verse, has once again returned to the same athletic imagery of a long-distance runner, running in a long-distance race, that he had earlier introduced in Hebrews 12:1.

So he's going back to this athletic imagery of this guy that's just running and running and running and running. But this time, as he once again returned to this imagery of a long-distance runner, 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 focused on the dropping hands and the buckling knees of an exhausted long-distance runner. Now, I don't know how many of you guys are long-distance runners - I am not a long-distance runner - but what I understand, is that you can start out a long-distance race very well. Your hands are up, and that's the way they should be, in order to be most effective in your running; and your knees are strong, and they're able to keep you steadfast in the race.

But as you continue to pound away, mile after mile after mile after mile after mile after mile after mile - you got the idea, right? What happens to the hands? They're harder to keep up. And what happens to the knees? They weaken. And you begin to become subject to the buckling of the knees, where you're just no longer stable, and you can begin to stumble; which, if you've ever watched long-distance races, you can see all of this, right? The hands dropping, the knees buckling; this is what he's talking about here. This author is drawing up the imagery of what happens to an exhausted long-distance runner in his long-distance race, as those signs of exhaustion begin to become more obvious; hands begin to drop, knees begin to buckle.

So why did he do this, why did he draw upon this imagery? He did this to make a point, a very important point. So listen up, it has to do with us. Just as an exhausted long-distance runner, running in a long-distance race, will

inevitably show signs of physical exhaustion if they run long enough and far enough; so also will a spiritually exhausted runner show signs of spiritual exhaustion in their own long-distance race of faith. When we signed up to enter this race - do you remember when you signed up to enter this race of faith? When was it? Hopefully, you can remember your testimony, when you heard the gospel of Christ, and you believed that Jesus was who He said He was, and He did what He said He did, and through His death, burial and resurrection, you, through a simple step of faith, could come into a personal relationship with God.

At that moment in time, what happened? You entered into this long-distance race of faith. You entered into this race where you were pursuing whom? Jesus! You were following after Him. For one day? Two days? How long? Until the what? End! We didn't sign up for a race that would end in one day or two days, we signed up in a race that would end at the end of our life. Do you know how difficult a race like that is? Every day, getting up, saying, "Now, Lord, what would you have me to do?" As you're being battered and beat about by all kinds of sufferings and difficulties, do you know how hard it is to keep going and keep going and keep going and keep going? Can you imagine how hard that is? You should say, "Amen! I know how hard it is, because I'm in it!" Do you feel it? It is not easy, but that's what we signed up for.

And during the course of this race - spiritually speaking, in terms of the imagery of this - we can begin to have our hands begin to drop, and our knees can begin to buckle. That's just the way it is. So these are the signs of spiritual exhaustion. I mean, there are signs of spiritual exhaustion, let me say it that way. So let me ask you - what might be some of the signs of spiritual exhaustion? If you're in this long-distance race, if I'm in this long-distance race, and we're running, and every day, we're pounding it out - "Lord, now what would you have me to do?"

What would be some of the signs that we're beginning to have our hands drop, and our knees begin to buckle? What would be some of the signs of that? Really not very hard to figure out, is it? You may have experienced it.

You're not particularly interested in prayer all that much anymore; you can go days, weeks, you're fine. The Word doesn't seem to be as attractive to you, your appetite for it has weaned; you'll pick it up once in a while. Your fellowship with the saints, coming together and gathering together with them, will have weaned; it's not going to be particularly interesting. Oh, you might come for a special occasion, or when it's convenient. Your interest in Christian service - non-existent. It's just kind of like, "Hey - I'm busy. I have stuff to do. Projects to complete." And just forget about evangelism; there's no energy, no passion for it anymore - it's gone. You've dried up.

So are there signs of spiritual exhaustion? Of going day after day after day after day, trying to seek to do God's will, every day having to fight all of the adversity, and all of the difficulties, and every day getting up and going at the same race again? Of course there's difficulties in that, and we can become weak, and we can become exhausted, and those signs will become evident. The Christian life is not easy, so when we or someone else begins to show signs of spiritual exhaustion, what do we need to do? Okay, what does Hebrews 12:12 say? Strengthen weak hands and feeble knees! That's what it says. That's what we are to do.

So how would someone go about doing that? Now, isn't that a good question? How do you do that? How would someone go about strengthening weak hands and feeble knees? Now that is a good question. But does it have an answer? Did the author give us an answer? He did. Now, 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 weak hands and feeble knees; but he did - it's just not obvious to us, because we're not Hebrews, familiar with Old Testament.

But these people that he was writing to were Hebrew Christians, and they were extremely familiar with the Old Testament scriptures. And so for them, as soon as they heard these words, they immediately thought back into what they knew. Hebrews 12:12 is a brief restatement of a longer exhortation from Isaiah 35, verses 3 and 4, which these Hebrew readers would have been very familiar with, and that they would have immediately known to have

been the basis for his words in Hebrews 12, verse 12. So what are these verses? Let me read these verses for you, and I'll be reading from the English Standard Version. And this is what was said by the prophet Isaiah, 700 years prior to the writing of Hebrews 12:12. See if there's any similarity here. Isaiah 35, verse 3: "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm feeble knees."

But then he goes on, and tells them how they were to do that. I'm glad he did, because we can use it today. He went on in verse 4, and said this, "Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come and save you.'" This author, Isaiah, in the midst of their troubles, was pointing them to look upward, and look forward, to something that was out there for them. And that was their national hope, of the return of their Messiah. They were suffering difficulty, there were national powers around them that were threatening them, they could see it anytime, Syria coming in and annihilating them; they were fearful, they were anxious, they may have begun - and they did, they had begun to struggle in their walk of faith. They had begun to consider turning away from Jehovah God, and from the laws of God, in their fear. But in the midst of it, these are the words of Isaiah to them, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come and save you."

So, based on these verses, what was the author of Hebrews trying to communicate to his readers under their persecution? Based on Isaiah 35, verses 3 and 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. Help them! To focus. Help them to focus on the certainty, and the blessings of Christ's promised return. That is what he was doing. Isaiah was pointing Israel, the Jewish people, to focus on their national hope of the coming Messiah and establishment of the millennial kingdom.

But in parallel with that, what was this author here doing? He was encouraging the church to focus, in the midst of their sufferings, to focus on their hope, the blessed hope of Christ's return, when He would receive them to Himself. And that is exactly what we see Jesus doing in John 14:1-3,



when His disciples were troubled by His announcement that He would be departing them and they would not be able to follow Him. So how did He minister to their hearts? You know these verses. Quote them! I should challenge you right now to quote them for me. John 14:1-3, who would like to volunteer? "Let not 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." Those were comforting words that would allow His disciples to endure all of the stuff that they were going to have to suffer.

Can you imagine what they probably did for one another in the days ahead, as they were being imprisoned and beaten and martyred? What do you think they were saying to one another? Remember the words of Jesus. He's coming, and He'll receive us unto Himself; that where He is, we may be also. Do you think that would help them keep going? Absolutely. May God give us the grace to understand these words, to embrace these words, this truth; so that in our long-distance race of faith, we may be able to keep going. So the first exhortation - strengthen weak hands and feeble knees; but then he went on. So we're going from verse 12 to verse 13.

The author exhorted his readers to make straight paths for their feet; and that's exactly what it says, beginning of verse 13, "And make straight paths for their feet." But unlike with verse 12, he goes on; now he actually explains why, which is good. So why was he exhorting them to make straight paths for their feet? So that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather healed. Okay, what does that mean? What is he talking about? So once again, we see this author using athletic imagery of a long-distance runner to help communicate to his readers what he wanted to say; but this time, he is not focusing on the imagery of an exhausted long-distance runner, as he runs mile after mile after mile after mile, he's changing the imagery. 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 the injured limb becoming out of joint. That's what verse 13 is telling us,

that's the imagery.

So how might this imagery of an injured long-distance runner be applied to these readers, in their long-distance race of faith? When an individual, by the grace of God, through faith in Christ, embraces Him as their Lord and Savior and enters this long-distance race of faith, pursuing and following after Him day in and day out, they will not only be subject at times to spiritual exhaustion - which hopefully all of us in our long-distance race have somewhat become familiar with, because it does happen - but also to spiritual injury; brought about by some excruciatingly painful human event that 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.

Do you understand what I'm saying? Sometimes, when we're going through life following day in and day out, we're just getting beat down day in day out, trying to be obedient in all things; but sometimes - if I had a big hammer here, I would just swing it right now and smash this podium - sometimes, there's this huge sledgehammer that comes down on us at a point in time in our lives, that just leaves us mush. Have you ever experienced any of that? If you haven't, you will. And when that happens, you will be spiritually staggered; because your temptation will be to focus on the trauma, and on the injury of that trauma. And when you begin to focus on that, what are you not focusing on? Who are you not focusing on? Jesus! And you just begin to get wrapped up in all of your pain, and that's where you live. And some people never get out of it; they just stay there, wrapped up in their pain. But that would be a very huge mistake, as we will see.

So in light of all of this backdrop, what did the author exhort his readers to do? You know, if they experienced something like this - and these readers were actually experiencing these kind of traumas - so what did he exhort them to do? Make straight paths for their feet, that's what he said. So what does this exhortation mean? This exhortation was most likely based on Proverbs 4, verses 26 and 27; which again, the Hebrew recipients of this book would have certainly been very familiar with. So now let me read that

passage for you, from the Old Testament. This is what these verses say, "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, which 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. Don't get diverted, stay on it; that's what he's doing. So let me ask you this question, why was this exhortation so important to his readers to heed? Well, it had extremely dramatic - possibly dramatic - impact, or impacts on their life if they chose to not heed this exhortation.

And that goes on to the explanation; remember why they needed to heed this exhortation? What did he tell them about their limb? If they become lame, and if they don't heed this exhortation, the limb that was lame will become out of joint. Have any of you ever had a joint that's dislocated? If you have a dislocated shoulder, will you be able to use your arm? What's the answer? You will not, it's physically impossible to use your arm. It's done. If it's your leg, which in this case, in this runner, is what happened; that limb that had become lame because of trauma will now become out of joint. It will be impossible for that runner to continue in the race.

That is why it's so important for this individual, who has been traumatized through some type of earthly event, to get up and focus on what is ahead for them in the path of obedience; lest the lame limb, which has been traumatized, will now become out of joint, and they will not finish the race. And if they don't finish the race, what does that mean? They will not be saved. You have to finish the race. God did not save us to quit, right? God saved us to finish. That's why it says, in Matthew 24 verse 13, that those who endure to the end will be saved. Because those who have exercised genuine living saving faith, which is a gift from God, will continue into the race until they finish the race, because that is what God has purposed for us,

that is why we were saved, to finish the race. So if we don't finish it, then we are not saved. That's why it's so important for us to make sure our lame limb doesn't become out of joint by ignoring this exhortation in this verse. To really begin to move forward, in a path of obedience, we must do that. So hopefully, everyone here is committed to that. No matter what trauma you experience, you're not going to get off this path because the consequences are too great.

And lastly, the author exhorted his readers to pursue peace in exhortation, that's in verse 14. Now, this may seem to you a little bit disjointed, but it isn't; it is connected to what has preceded. "Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord." That's what he says. Now, what does this have to do with what came before? If we, in fact, haven't committed ourself to this long-distance race, by grace through faith, and we are now on the process of following Jesus; and if we, in the midst of this long-distance race, day after day after day after day, in spite of spiritual exhaustion, continue to focus on Christ and the end goal, that He's waiting for us at the end; and if, while we are in this race, even though we may be spiritually traumatized through some grave earthly event for a moment in time, if we keep pressing forward toward the mark, heeding the exhortations that have come before, that certain things are going to be - not maybe, not might, but will be- manifested in our lives; we will begin to pursue these pursuits, the evidence that we're in the race and that we're running to win.

And if we don't have these pursuits within our life, then it evidences we're not in the race. These are the manifestations of those who are pressing forward, in spite of spiritual exhaustion, and in spite of spiritual trauma, are continuing to press forward in the race. What will they do? They will pursue peace and sanctification. The first one is, those who continue to follow after Christ will inevitably pursue peace with all men. It is not an option; this is what's going to happen. If you're following after Jesus, which you hopefully are, then what are you going to do? In spite of spiritual exhaustion, in spite of spiritual trauma, you're going to be striving to live in peace with all men. Not just believers, but unbelievers, not to only those that are good to you, but those that are cruel to you, who are seeking your destruction. You're

going to continue to seek to live at peace with them. It doesn't mean that you'll make peace, but it does mean you're striving to, you will do that. That is the evidence of your pursuit of Jesus, because that is what Jesus does; so, this is what we would do.

So, whatever the situation you may be in, no matter how difficult a person is you may be dealing with, you need to be in the pursuit of living at peace with them, because you're in the pursuit of being at peace with all men. So that is what this says. So that's the first part of it, and the second is sanctification. Those who continue to follow after Christ will inevitably pursue sanctification. This is not an option, this will happen. Again, if we have gotten into the race; and again, even though we may at times be spiritually exhausted if we continue to look to Jesus, even at times when we may experience spiritual trauma, if we would just simply stay on the path of obedience and be healed, and that limb that could have been out of joint was actually now made whole, then what is going to happen? We're going to pursue not only peace with all men, but we are going to be actually pursuing sanctification.

This sanctification is not positional sanctification; positional sanctification is a one-time event when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, are placed into Christ by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and we become joined to Christ. And in being joined to Christ, we are positionally sanctified, or set apart, for God. This can never change, it's a fact. But now, what our fact is needs to become our reality; in other words, we are now in the pursuit of becoming what we are. And we need to see that pursuit, and that is practical sanctification. Those who are pursuing sanctification, practical sanctification, as in Hebrews 12 verse 14, are those who, as a manifestation of their faith in Christ, are continuously seeking to bring their lives into conformity to Christ, and will show the evidence of it. We need to be continually transformed, more and more, into the image of Christ.

That is what this practical sanctification is all about, and that is the evidence that we are, in fact, in this race; having overcome spiritual exhaustion, having overcome traumatic spiritual injury, having overcome all of this by

focusing on Christ into a path of obedience. We are now in the pursuit of these things, demonstrating that we are saved, and we are manifesting this salvation through our practical sanctification. And if we're not showing these pursuits, then we're in trouble, really big trouble.

May God, in spite of what we may have to suffer, give us the grace to keep running in our long-distance race of faith, until we cross the finish line, and into the arms of Christ. We must keep running, and that doesn't mean just sitting there, doing what you've done the day before; it's meaning pursuing Jesus with all of your heart, with all of your mind, with all of your soul, each and every day; and seeking to live in conformity to Him, so that you might be an honor to Him, and that you might testify to yourself and others that you truly are in this race of faith, and that you will finish it. And when you finish it, who will you seek? Jesus. Ready to receive us unto Himself, that where He is, we may be also.