

The Pilgrims' Progress
Hebrews 12:12–17
June 23, 2024

In Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*—not long after *Christian* looked to the cross and his burden was lifted—he came to the foot of a hill. On page 42 of my book, Bunyan writes that “the narrow Way” went right up that hill; and that the hill itself was called, “Difficulty.” So, just a few pages after *Christian* considered Him who'd endured hostility by sinners, he *then* considers what *he* must endure. Staring up that hill, he said this, “This hill, though high, I covet to ascend, the difficulty will not me offend. For I perceive the way to life lies here: come pluck up heart, let's neither faint nor fear; better, though difficult, the right way to go, than wrong, though easy, where the end is wo.”¹

Then *Christian* put one foot in front of the other on his way to the Celestial City. As he does so, there's imagery in seemingly every step. And it's an imagery not unlike the book of Hebrews. Today's passage includes language about making straight paths for feet, about strengthening knees, and about lame limbs being healed *so that* something might be pursued. This language comes, of course, *after* the chapter began with these words: **run with endurance the race that is set before us** (Heb. 12:2).

The parallels don't end there, of course. Chapter 11 described those of faith as strangers and exiles on the earth (11:13). In other words, “pilgrims.” Further, these exiles in Hebrews desired “a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:16). So, as *Christian* journeys to a city, these Jewish Christians seek one with foundations, whose architect and builder is God, a city which is to come (Heb. 11:10; 13:14).

And yet, they were *still*—in one sense—on page 42. The narrow way led—*first*—up this hill called “Difficulty.”

For much of the book, and especially since Hebrews 10, we've noted that these Christians had need of endurance (10:36). Today we *continue* that emphasis. The book does. But in these verses, we'll see yet *another* gracious aspect of the Lord's provision for our endurance.

1. Endure (vv. 12–13)

Again, the race imagery hasn't disappeared from the author's mind. He began Hebrews 12 talking about laying aside every encumbrance and the sin that entangles *so that* we might run. I might've mentioned this before, but if you're looking for a free fleece—and you don't mind hand-me-downs—you might consider heading downtown the first weekend of December. Because many races start early in the morning, when it's cold, inexperienced runners will show up for a race wearing a jacket. But because the day quickly warms up, and because being hot is one of a runner's great enemies, folks eventually rip their nice fleece off and—with nowhere to “hang it up”—they just drop them right in the middle of the street. So that they might endure, jackets lie in the wake of runners.

Hebrews 12 began with that kind of athletic imagery. Last week we switched to familial imagery, considering the Father's discipline of a son for the *good* of the son. Is there any connection between these two images? Though it might *seem* to be a shift, it's really not. It was common in that world to combine these images. Why? Because *both* the athletic and the young need training.² So, rather than mixing metaphors, it's to blend them.

¹ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 42.

² Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, 615.

Why say all that? Because verse 12 *continues* the athletic imagery that began the chapter: **Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble.** Throughout this passage are allusions and quotations from the Old Testament Scriptures. Here is a reference to Isaiah 35:3, a section pointing Jewish men and women to future hope. That's *not* insignificant.

Because this verse is right on the heels of seeing purpose in suffering. It's in the context of the author's encouragements to zoom out and see a longer perspective than what's right in front of us in *this* particular moment. Verse 10: **He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.** Or verse 11: **to those who have been trained by it (discipline), afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.** Right after *that*, we hear verse 12's "therefore" and Isaiah 35: **Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble.**

As maybe you've noticed, the book of Hebrews hasn't been command after command. In fact, there's only been six or seven in the twelve chapters thus far. Instead of commanding the hearers, the author stacks up assertion after assertion.

Yet, those assertions have been intended to lead somewhere. Though only six or seven commands have been in the entire book thus far, we have three in our text today. "Strengthen" is the first. They're to strengthen hands and knees. To follow the imagery, if we're boxing, weak hands will not do. And if it's race, feeble knees will not either. There's no way to get around your feet meeting the path step after step, shooting the collision between sole and soil up your leg into a knee that's feeble. It's an unrelenting punch, punch, punch, etc. In short, if you don't strengthen your knee, you won't run. Or, to say it positively, strengthening your knee *enables* one to run, to endure. That's why the author commands it.

Verse 13 continues that moving forward imagery: **and make straight paths for your feet.** Last week we read the author's quotation from Proverbs 3: **My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord** (Heb. 12:5). Many scholars believe verse 13 is an allusion to the next chapter, Proverbs 4:26, which reads: **Watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established.**

Whenever the New Testament quotes or alludes to the Old Testament, I find it helpful to read the context of the original passage. I mentioned that with Isaiah 35 moments ago. So, let me read the verse before and after in Proverbs 4: **Let your eyes look directly ahead and let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you. Watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established. Do not turn to the right nor to the left; turn your foot from evil** (Prov. 4:25–27).

Sounds familiar. These Jewish Christians were to let their gaze be fixed, their eyes set on the Author and Perfector of their faith. And as they fixed their eyes, they were to run the race set before them, not turning to the right nor to the left.

In other words, they were to stay on the trail, the Way. When *Christian* came to that hill called "Difficulty," there were actually two others with him. They'd come some distance with him. Yet when they saw that the hill ahead was steep and high, and that there were two "other ways to go . . . they were resolved to go in those ways." Bunyan writes, "Now the name of one of those ways was *Danger*, and the name of the other *Destruction*."³

In these two verses are two commands: (1) "Strengthen" hands and knees; and (2) "make straight paths" for your feet. Both of those commands have a purpose, noted at the end of verse 13: **so that the limb which is lame may not be put of our joint, but rather be healed.** I don't know if you've noticed, but it's *off* the trail where people get hurt. That's where the ditches are. That's where you sprain your ankle. And if you have a limb that's lame, that's where it gets worse.

If you were here Wednesday night, you recall how I interpreted these two verses. First, we're to note that they are commands. But secondly, and importantly, we're to note that they are *plural*

³ Bunyan, 43.

commands. To be more specific, these commands address a *group* of believers, who are told, “You *all* strengthen the hands that are weak; and you *all* strengthen the knees that are feeble.”

It’s corporate instruction to a community. It’s not *merely* that we strengthen our *own* hands or knees, it’s that we’re instructed to consider that which is weak around us, to consider the lame in our midst, and labor that they might be strengthened too.⁴

In other words, it’s not *just* that we’re to endure, we’re to:

2. See that all endure (vv. 12–15)

Later on in Bunyan’s book, *Christian* is walking with *Hopeful*. *Hopeful* had been used, and *would* be used, to encourage *Christian*. But in this section of the book they walk into a, quote, “certain Country, whose air naturally tended to make one drowzy.”⁵ Once there, *Hopeful* tells *Christian* he’d like to lie down and take a nap. *Christian* immediately responds: “Do you not remember, that one of the Shepherds bid us beware of the Enchanted ground?” Upon that reminder, *Hopeful* remembers. He remembers that he’d been warned; and he responds with the math of Ecclesiastes: “Had I been here alone, I had by sleeping run the danger of Death. I see it is true, that the Wise Man saith, “Two are better than one.”⁶

So, keeping in mind that the imperatives in verses 12 and 13 are corporate commands, we can see that emphasis *continue* in verses 14 and 15. Verse 14: **Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.**

First, note that the phrase, “with all men” *can* get in the way of grasping that which these believers were to pursue. That phrase “with all men” qualifies “pursue,” not “peace.”⁷ In other words, it might be translated, “with all, pursue peace and sanctification.” It wasn’t one or the other. Instead, *together* they were to pursue *both*.

That’s a slight nuance, but it’s significant. Whatever it is they are chasing after, it’s a corporate pursuit. With *that* in mind, secondly, “all men” must mean a united pursuit by the Christian community.⁸ It wouldn’t make sense to pursue holiness and/or sanctification with those *outside* the people of God. That’s not a race the world has signed up for.

Those are the three commands in this passage. Verse 12: “You all strengthen.” Verse 13: “You all make straight paths.” And third, in verse 14: “You all pursue peace and sanctification.”

Verse 15 goes on to tell us, in one sense, *how* they were to do these things: **See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God.** I’ve mentioned the plural terms throughout, but here’s where that plurality meets the singular. All of them—*plural*—are to see to it, that no *one*—singular—comes short of the grace of God. They’d all been commanded to strengthen feeble knees. With all, they were to pursue peace and holiness. And, further, they were to watch out for those among them—individuals even—that might be coming short.

Verse 15 goes on to be a bit more specific about what this coming short of the grace of God might look like: **that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble.** This instruction seems to allude to Deuteronomy 29:18:⁹ **Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit.**

⁴ David Peterson, *Possessed By God*, NSBT, 73;

⁵ Yeah, with a z.

⁶ Bunyan, 158.

⁷ Cockerill, 633.

⁸ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 662.

⁹ Tom Schreiner connects these verses in *Hebrews*, EBTC, 391.

Wednesday night I mentioned this as a biblical rationale for *not* keeping one another at arm's length. The church isn't something merely to consume. It's not somewhere you download information and then say, "see you next week." It's a body to belong to. It's a people the Lord's united you to. It's a people you have an obligation toward. That is, the Spirit of God causes you to care about their good.

This *doesn't* mean we're always looking for the next opportunity to rebuke. But it *does* mean that in *this* race we're all pulling for the one next to us to finish.¹⁰ Two are better than one. We persevere together.

I've mentioned this more than once, but it's a vital image for us to grasp. Mark Dever once described a young man that was convinced that the church was just lagging too far behind. If he were to link arms with them, consider *their* needs and *their* spiritual growth, then he asserted there was little to no question he would have to slow down. He wouldn't "get as far," or "go as fast." Dever asked that man a probing question, something like, "Have you ever considered that if you were to link arms with the church, that you might actually help pull them along? And have you considered that God might be *more* glorified in the church honoring Christ *together* than you doing it all by yourself?"

That's the instruction of verse 15: You all see to it that no one comes short of the grace of God.

In Hebrews 11 we repeatedly mentioned the effectiveness of example. The Old Testament saints witness to—testify to us—that endurance is possible, as well as *how* to endure. They lived by faith in things hoped for, by faith in things unseen. Hebrews 12 doesn't negate that principle. It just makes it more specific. They looked forward to One to come. We look to the One who *has come*. And as we do, fixing our eyes, neither turning to the right nor the left, we run the race.

Further, we walk the straight path *so that* others might as well. I've not crossed that bridge yet. You have. In one sense, we make straight paths for one another. Because that path—*that* Way—is where, little by little, the lame might be healed. The apostrophe in the title matters. It's not *just* the pilgrim's progress, it's the pilgrims' progress.

Whose perseverance are you laboring toward? Are other church members even allowed to labor toward yours? You know what the character *Ignorance* said in Bunyan's book? He said, "I take my pleasure in walking alone."¹¹

In the scene mentioned above, *Christian* sings a song: "When saints do sleepy grow, let them come hither, and hear how these two Pilgrims talk together, yea, let them learn of them in any wise thus to keep ope' their drowzy slumb'ring eyes; saints fellowship if it be manag'd well, keeps them awake, and that in spite of hell."¹²

We endure. We see that *all* endure. Note third,

3. So that no one comes short (vv. 16–17)

At the end of verse 15, the author makes plain that—should we *not* pay attention to this, that is, *not* pay attention to one another—the root of bitterness can bring about the poisonous fruit Deuteronomy warned about. Further, the effects of sin are more contagious than maybe we assume. Verse 15 ends: **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.**

¹⁰ Cockerill writes, "The hearers are to 'pursue peace and holiness' by 'watching out' lest that holiness be violated through the unfaithfulness of any member, and thus that peace be shattered." 635.

¹¹ Bunyan, 167.

¹² Bunyan, 159.

Many become defiled. Note that sin doesn't just affect *me*. It affects *us*. This is one reason why we take membership so seriously. It's one reason why we encourage you to live in relationship with one another. It's one reason why someone might ask probing questions. Because roots of bitterness—roots of *any* kind of sin, in fact—bear fruit. That fruit is poison. And many are defiled by it.

Our passage ends with a warning concerning one that came short of the grace of God. We've mentioned more than once that to understand the warnings in Hebrews we must disabuse ourselves of the notion that warnings are *always* bad. Instead, we're to see them as loving, intended to bring about our good.

On Friday as I was writing this sermon, I did what I often do, that is, finish a section of the sermon and then take a little walk around the property to think through the next section. Moving helps me think. I've walked all over this place. But in all my years I've never walked up that short gravel drive behind me up toward the massive antenna pole. On Friday I decided to.

When I walked up the short gravel drive, I began noticing signs all over the fence that surrounds that pole, declaring things like, "No Trespassing," and "Do not climb without permission." But then I noticed another sign, "Beyond this point: radio frequency fields at this site may exceed FCC rules for human exposure." You think I kept walking toward that fence? No. Those words stopped me in my tracks. Warned, I walked right on back.

Verse 16 warns the people of God, for their good. Quite unlike those we read about in Hebrews 11, this verse mentions one who came short of the grace of God. As the people of God were watching out for one another, verse 16 goes on to say they were to see to it: **that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal.**

As you know, Esau was the elder brother, set up to receive the inheritance. Yet, with all that ahead of him, for a *single* meal—one!—he sold his birthright. How short-sighted was *that*? That action—brief as it was—shows us how little he valued what had been promised him.¹³

Repeatedly, Hebrews has instructed us to look forward—to things unseen, to things hoped for. It's assured us of an eternal inheritance (Heb. 9:15). It's told us that Christ is able to save forever (Heb. 7:25). And it's told us those things about the future so that we might continue to run in the present.

In his race, Esau fell short of the grace of God.¹⁴ Verse 17 goes on to describe his tragic fall: **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.**

That verse *can* be, and *has* been, misunderstood. We must ask: what is the "it," that which he sought with tears? Was it repentance? Did Esau seek *repentance* and not find it? Absolutely not. The "it" he desired refers to the blessing.¹⁵ With tears he sought the blessing he'd sold for a single meal. But he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance.

That's a warning, a warning for our good.

¹³ Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 379.

¹⁴ Harris, 377; Cockerill, 637.

¹⁵ Harris, 381

Conclusion

Early in *Christian's* journey on the Way, before the hill called *Difficulty*, *Mr. Worldly Wiseman*—befitting his name—tells *Christian*, “Hear me, I am older than thou; . . . in the way which though goest, Wearisomeness, Painfulness, Hunger, Perils, Nakedness, Sword, Lions, Dragons, Darkness, and in a word, death.”¹⁶ He’s not telling *Christian* that for good reasons. He’s trying to tell him there’s an easier way. As we see, *Christian* isn’t perfect. In fact, he momentarily steps *off* the Way.

But he wasn’t walking alone. *Evangelist* comes along, asking, “What doest thou here?”¹⁷ *Christian* tells *Evangelist* what *Mr. Worldly Wiseman* had said. *Evangelist* responds with many encouragements, including these words you might recognize: “Thou must abhor his labouring to render the Cross odious unto thee; for thou art to prefer it before the treasures in Egypt.”¹⁸

A few pages later, after *another* person left the Way, *Christian* still wasn’t alone. *Good-will* asked concerning the one who’d departed, “Is the Celestial Glory of so small esteem with him, that he count it not worth running the hazard of a few difficulties to obtain it?”

And all that is before *Christian* came to the hill called *Difficulty*. Once there, he hears yet again of danger ahead. To which *Christian* responds: “You make me afraid. But whither shall I fly to be safe? . . . I must venture; to go back, is nothing but death; to go forward, is Fear of death, and Life everlasting beyond it: I will yet go forward.”¹⁹

We strengthen knees. We make straight paths, following the One who for the joy set before Him endured the cross. His endurance enables ours. So, we fix our eyes on Him, and then put one foot in front of the other. And we don’t do so alone. We see to it that *all* endure, so that no one comes short of the grace of God.

¹⁶ Bunyan, 14.

¹⁷ Bunyan, 16.

¹⁸ Bunyan, 19.

¹⁹ Bunyan, 44.